

3 NATIMUK HISTORIC AREA

3.1 Historic Background

The township of Natimuk has its origins in the survey of Eastone Johnstone of August, 1875. The location that he chose followed an earlier survey nearby and it appears that it reflected the existence of a store by the creek banks on which teamsters were in the habit of camping. The central area of nearby Horsham had been surveyed some 26 years earlier. But it was during the mid to late 1870's and the early 1880's that the rural holdings surrounding the township were sold off in lots mostly just over 300 acres in area. Collectively they were to provide a resident population that needed a township at hand to supply them with goods and process their grain. A railway was to pass nearby, on the run from Horsham to Noradjuha in 1887. The nearest station was East Natimuk and the line to Natimuk was not to follow until 1890 with an extension to Groke in 1894.

As early as 1875 or 76 Bretag and Kuse, who were to bid successfully at the land sales in 1879 for rural holdings, had built their flour mill at Natimuk¹⁰ and John Wilson opened his store there in the following year. It is thought that the Schmidt family's house at no.5 Schmidt Street, made partly in pise, dates from this period. It survives as the oldest house in Natimuk. Heinrich Sudholtz opened the first hotel which he called the "Natimuk" in 1876. It was burnt down in 1881 and rebuilt in 1884 in stone and brick. Delicensed immediately prior to the Second World War it remains in a prominent position at the corner of Schmidt and Main Street. The surviving "National" had a similar history to the extent that it was built in 1877, burnt down in 1891 and rebuilt the following year in its present form.

Natimuk's most important industry, however, was its foundry, located alongside the Colonial Bank and established in 1879. It achieved its greatest output of strippers, winnowers and wagons in 1894. The greater number of its implements was exported by rail and the partners, Beard and Sisson, also had foundries at Dimboola and Nhill. The Natimuk foundry also manufactured cast iron verandah posts for the streets of Horsham but it eventually fell victim to competition from the larger centres, closing its doors in 1910. It is recalled, however, by the surviving shed at no. 84 Main Street. Other industries in Main street included Thomas Jelbart's coach factory, sold to H.C. Woolmer who relocated the business to Schmidt Street in 1908. It is understood this building was on the site of the surviving "Natimuk Motor Garage" at the Station Street corner.

By the late 1880's Natimuk was entering its most prosperous years. There were wheelwrights, a saddler, bootmaker, building contractors and tradesmen, storekeepers, a baker and a post office, the present building symbolizing something of the town's view of itself when it was opened in 1890. The railway station was also opened in 1890 along with the new brick school building which became the senior school classroom. The courthouse, now the home of the Arapiles Historical Society, was opened in July of the following year. And so it was, in the years leading up to the bank crash of 1892, that

¹⁰ Lockwood, A., *Natimuk...now 125* Wimmera Mail Times (1997), p.8.

Andrew Ward

Architectural Historian

Natimuk gained its most imposing public buildings. They were to be scattered along the length of Main Street, however, with the result that although their collective impact is lessened, it could be argued that architectural interest is thereby maintained over the length of the principal thoroughfare.

The railway was in many ways symbolic of the town's continuing prosperity for it was here that the district's wheat was stacked prior to its transfer to seaboard markets. When the flour mill facing the station finally burnt down in 1920, Noske's, Bunge's, Kimpton's and Darling's employed buyers there before dispatching the grain to points east. Natimuk was to recover from the 1890's Depression, the Mechanics Institute building of 1909 bearing witness to the district's continuing prosperity. The surviving National Bank building had been opened the previous year and a contract for a new station building was let in October, 1910¹¹.

During the Great War, a Comfort Fund was established to support the soldiers and in 1921 the rotunda in the plantation opposite the post office was built to wind up its resources. Although the commercial centre is quite lengthy, it is the post office and rotunda which appears to mark its high point today. The construction of a motor garage in Station Street in 1920 was the harbinger of further change marking the advent of the motor car and its impacts on the viability of the small town. The railway withstood competition for many years and when the first "back-to" celebrations were held in 1924, contemporary photographs show that the arrival of the train was probably the busiest event on the programme. But the grain traffic was to prove to be the line's mainstay for many years, the wheat stacks of old being replaced by the present concrete silos in 1940. Later, the Railways Department introduced a rail motor service that called at Natimuk on its route to Goroke but it had been withdrawn by the late 1950's and the line itself was to close to all traffic in 1986. Today, there is no evidence of the station building, its goods shed and railway houses but close examination will reveal the cart weighbridge and the base of a crane at the entrance to the old goods yard.

Amongst the other changes sustained by the commercial centre has been the transfer of the seat of Local Government from Noradjuha to Natimuk. The first Council meeting was held in the Soldiers Memorial Hall in January, 1952 and the surviving offices were built a decade later. They were reduced in status following the formation of the Rural City of Horsham in 1994. The State School was moved to its new site in 1961. The old brick building remains but the timber classrooms at the rear have been removed, the so-called pavilion with its sliding canvas windows going to Geelong as an historical display. It was also during the 1960's that the courthouse was closed.

3.2 Description

The historic centre of Natimuk today has Main Street with its spacious plantations as its spine and a link with the old industrial area associated with the railway along Schmidt Street. At Jory Street the Natimuk Creek is an important scenic precinct contrasting with the urbanity of the principal shopping street. It is the courthouse and the "National" hotel that mark the commencement of the historic area at its eastern approach. They are

¹¹ See old Plan Room Contract books, PTC records.

Andrew Ward

Architectural Historian

followed by Schurmann's shop (closed), now without its posted verandah but important in the streetscape for its elaborate parapet treatment and timber shopfront. Immediately alongside but concealed from view is an early store. Main Street crosses a tributary to the Natimuk Creek a little further west beyond which are some recent buildings marking the site of earlier shops. It is, however, the short section between Jory and Schmidt Streets that marks the historic centre. Here are the former Colonial Bank and the post office, both monumental late nineteenth century edifices. They face the rotunda in the plantation whilst across the road is a billabong associated with the Natimuk Creek. Its presence is reinforced with gum trees, the juxtaposition of nature with the town's finest buildings imparting a sense of identity to Natimuk that separates it out from other comparable townships. The old "Natimuk" hotel with its stone lined street channel looks on from across Schmidt Street. It, too, is a highly individual building in these parts, with its combination of local stone and brick dressings. There is a number of small shops between Schmidt and Sisson Streets along with the Natimuk and District Soldiers Memorial hall and some early houses. The shops are bordered by a pitched channel which helps maintain their turn of the century context. There is an air of history about them due not only to their high level of integrity but also to their emptiness. At Sisson Street the old foundry building at no. 84 faces the plantations. As one proceeds west, the number of early houses begins to predominate until the plantation finishes abruptly and the Wimmera Highway opens up a vista of Mount Arapiles. Here also is the old school and the former teacher's house alongside.

Schmidt Street is of special interest for it provides a link with the site of the railway and the industries with which it was associated. Here is the Motor Garage, the old power house of 1927 and the site of the railway station and flour mill. The small timber building was the office of Newton and Miller, carriers, who no doubt were strategically positioned to cash in on traffic generated by the railway. The silos and cart weighbridge are signposts pointing to the location of the old station buildings. "Flowerdale", the very early home of the Schmidt family faces the now defunct Motor Garage building. Today, this industrial backwater can be easily overlooked yet it has so much to say about the township's economic base, from the beginnings of settlement until the Second World War.

Andrew Ward
Architectural Historian



Main Street, looking east from Schurmann's shop to the "National" hotel (1997).



The post office and former Colonial Bank building with plantations and rotunda in the foreground.

Andrew Ward
Architectural Historian



The Natimuk Creek at the back of the former Shire offices.

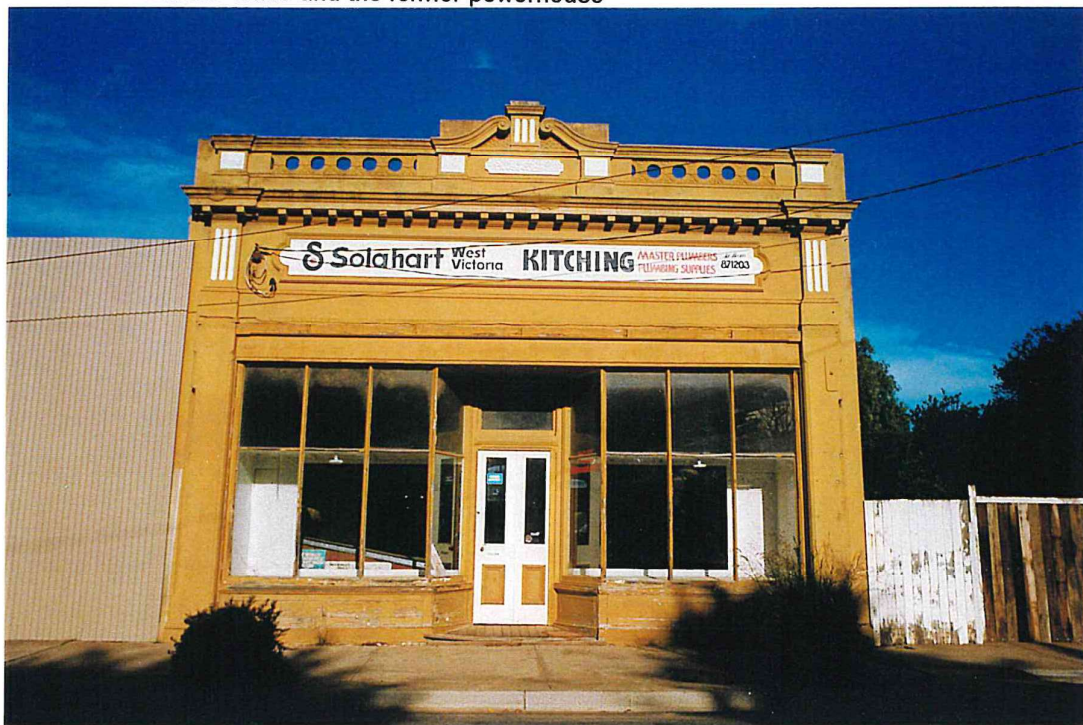


"Flowerdale"

Andrew Ward
Architectural Historian



Newton and Millers' office and the former powerhouse



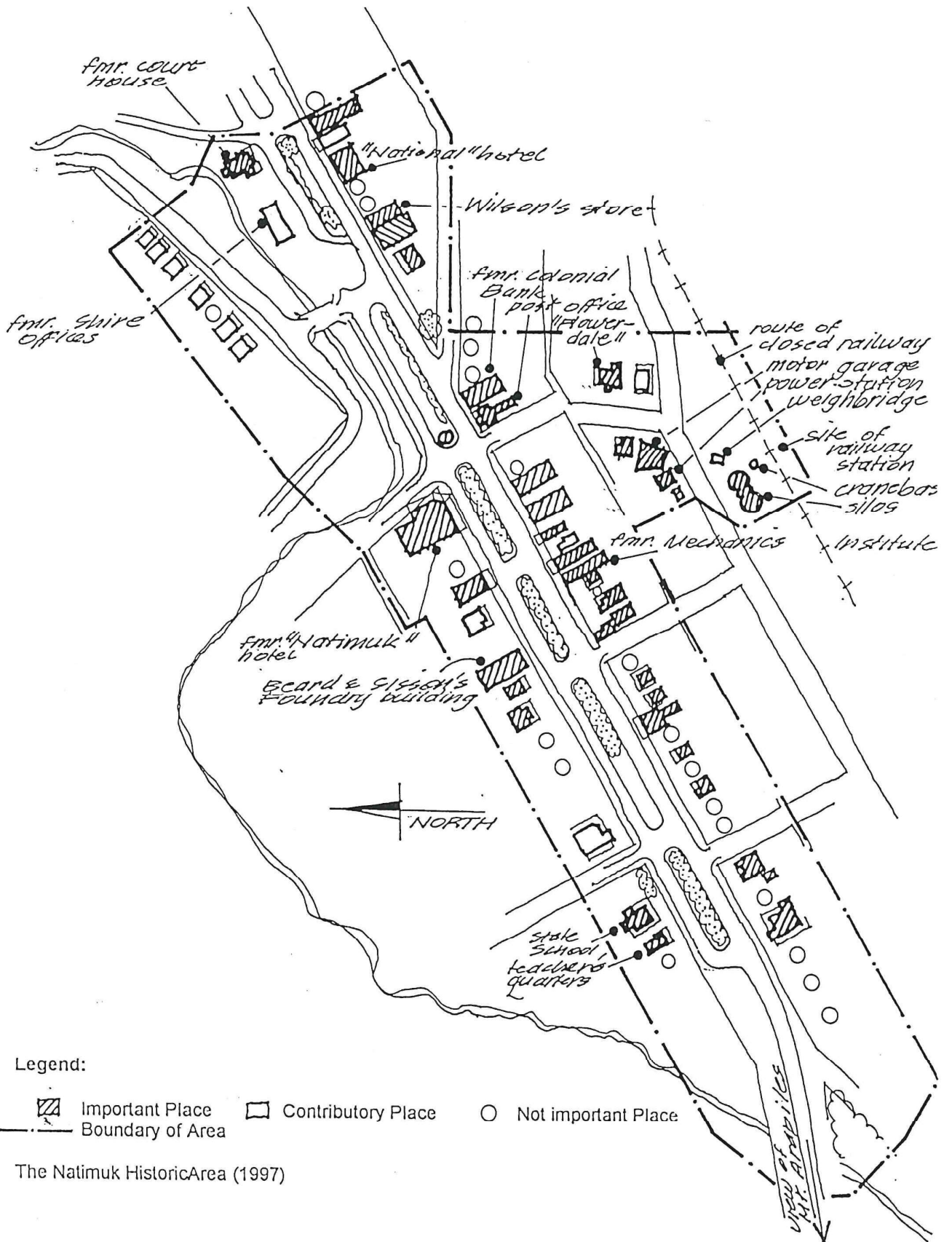
Schurmann's shop (closed)

Andrew Ward
Architectural Historian



Post Office

Andrew Ward
Architectural Historian



Andrew Ward

Architectural Historian

3.3 Significance

The Natimuk central area is culturally important for its capacity to demonstrate aspects of a remote nineteenth century wheatfields township (Criterion D). They include:

- The township plan with its broad main avenue and spacious plantation.
- The prominence given to public buildings in the main street, including the school, post office, mechanics institute and courthouse.
- The juxtaposition of imposing Italianate and vernacular buildings with the winding course of the Natimuk Creek.
- The linkages between past industry and the now closed railway line.
- The depth of history revealed by the buildings, which commences with what are understood to be the oldest store and the oldest house in Natimuk and extends to include the principal buildings of the township as well as its more recent though less urbane shops and amenities.

These insights are enhanced by the high level of integrity of the surviving buildings and public works, including pitched street channels.