

# PLOD ESSAY

## HISTORY IN THE MAKING

### A Grand Idea, 1973

“THERE will be a visitors’ centre, a lecture hall and a lookout. Visitors will be transported by train around the old mine site to take in the buildings and artefacts. Wonthaggi’s historical theme park will be the real deal, a magnificent state asset,” the architect assured the Wonthaggi Lions club in 1973 when he unveiled the project.

“There is no risk about its success,” he said.

This was no two-bob tout rather it was the famous architect Sir Roy Grounds, then at the height of his fame, talking about his plans for Wonthaggi. He had completed the National Gallery of Victoria and was working on the Melbourne Arts Centre, incorporating Hamer Hall and the theatres. Yet he found time to visit Wonthaggi in order to map out a 60-acre park on the grounds of the old No 5 Brace mine area.

“Wonthaggi’s coal mining theme will be unique and, if I did not believe in its success, I would not be associated with it as your honorary architect,” the *Sentinel Times* reports him telling the Lions Club.

### Historical Society Archive, 2024



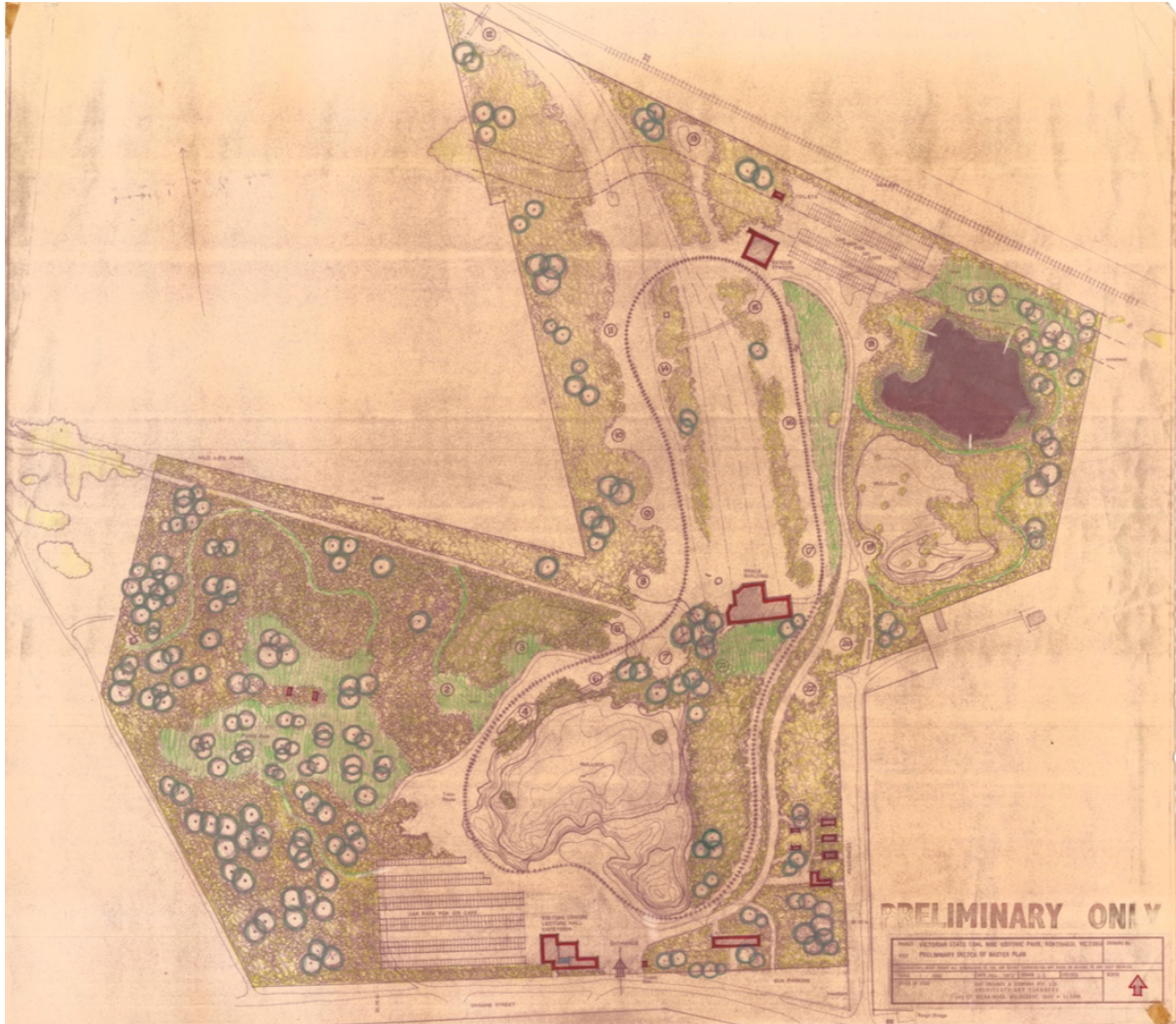
In early October of this year, 2024, Tony Lee, an architect and historian, emailed Wonthaggi & District Historical Society with an interesting request. He explained that as part of a retirement project, he was documenting all the work that Roy Grounds did.

“I’ve enjoyed his work very much,” he wrote. “While Grounds is famous for the NGV, Melbourne Arts Centre and Australian Academy of Science building in Canberra, his other work is little known.”

Amongst the major Grounds projects, Lee was searching through, was the surprising reference to Grounds’ plans for a pioneer village in Wonthaggi. Mark Robertson and Irene Williams immediately replied to Lee’s request, to say Grounds’ original hand-drawn designs for the project were stored in the museum, along with newspaper reports and photos.

Lee visited Wonthaggi in October to inspect the plans and visit the No 5 Brace mine site.

## The Plan



From the *Sentinel Times* report, it appears the Wonthaggi Lions Club commissioned the plans. The wonder is that they could contemplate engaging such a renowned architect. The answer, Lee says, is that they probably didn't have to pay. "Grounds is described in a newspaper cutting as 'the honorary architect', which usually implies that he was doing the work pro bono.

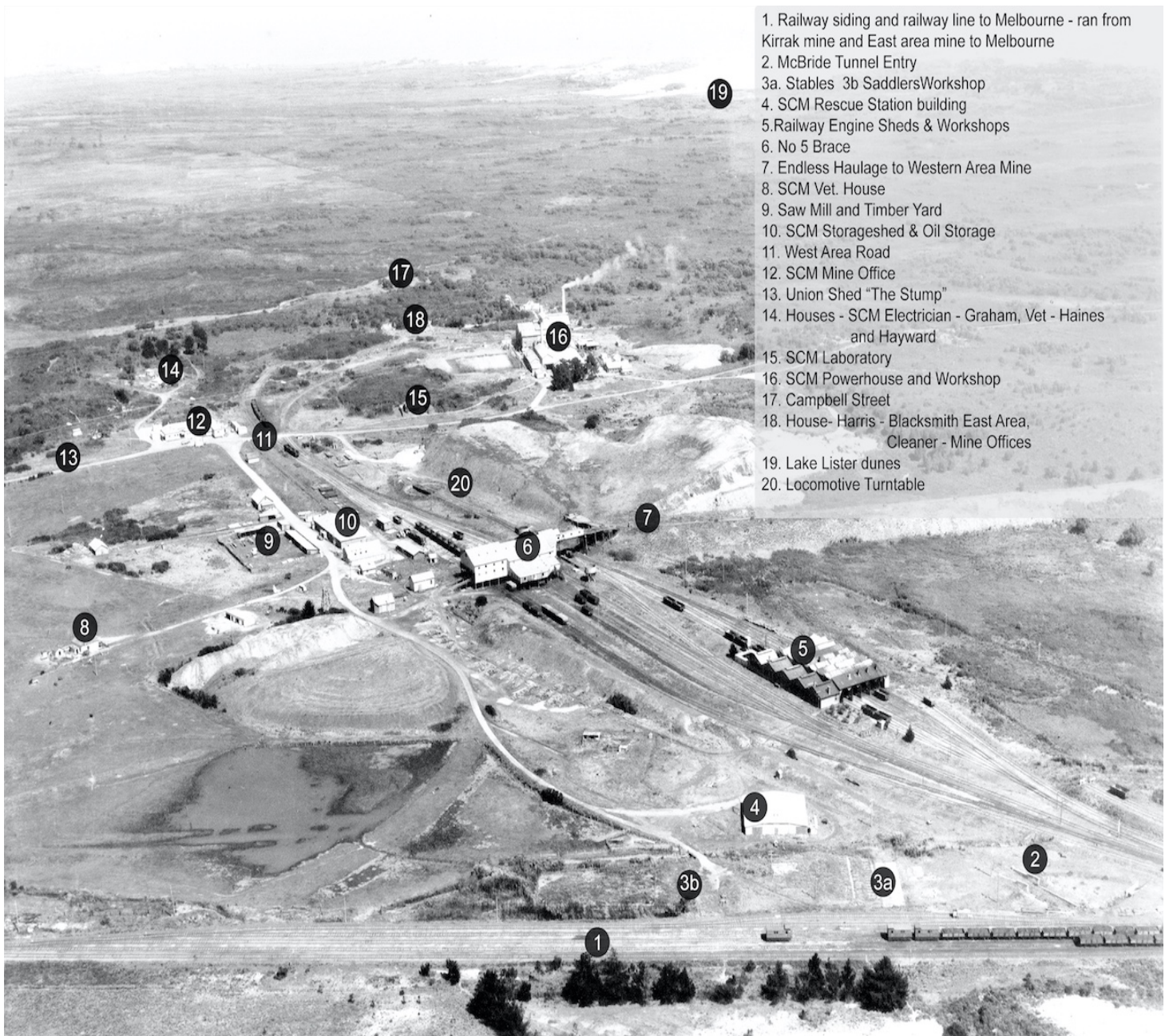
"As the State Government was his major client, he might also have wanted to maintain his position with them."



Back in 1973, when Grounds approached the Lions Club with his project, Wonthaggi was in sore need of a boost. The State Coal Mine had closed in 1968. At the time, it was seen as the death knell for Wonthaggi, although as we now know the obituaries were premature.

Lee says it was an age when folk museums and pioneer villages were all the rage. Swan Hill's museum (also designed by Grounds) was a big crowd puller. Old Gipps town opened at Moe in 1973 and Coal Creek opened at Korumburra in 1974.

## The Site



Perhaps because so many other historical theme parks went ahead, Wonthaggi's didn't. However, in the decades since, the State Coal Mine has emerged as a more than worthy alternative, with volunteers assisting Parks Victoria.

Although the park did not proceed on the old mine brace site, the rescue station is now a thriving arts centre and the decaying brace has become a tourist attraction in its own right, celebrated in paintings and photographs as "a beautiful wreck".



**No.5 Brace by Dennis Leversha (1992 oil on board)**

**This essay by Catherine Watson was first published one month ago in the October issue of BASS COAST POST for which she is the editor. Because it is such an important story, she has generously given us permission to re-publish it and has allowed us to alter it to fit into the ESSAY format for THE PLOD, Wonthaggi & District Historical Society monthly newsletter, which then becomes part of our archive.**

**Below are comments published in the POST from Catherine's readers:**

**Barbara Theresia Moje**

Hello Bass Coast Post! This is a fantastic discovery!!! I have always thought a more accessible park would be great there, and I am quite alarmed that the old buildings of No. 5 Brace (except the Rescue Station) are being left to the elements to be ruined and eventually be lost! Would I be able to get Tony Lee's contact, please?

I am really interested in following up on his research. I would also be interested in making sure the plans get preserved properly, ie. framed for display and stored well as I think this is of great public interest. I would love to get involved with the Historical Society to help.

Thanks.

**Jim Barritt**

Hi Barbara, thank you for your interest in this subject. Please rest assured that Wonthaggi & District Historical Society is absolutely committed to preserving and protecting the vast array of artefacts, documents, and items in the Society's collections.

You would be more than welcome to visit the Railway Station Museum on Tuesdays or Thursdays, or Saturdays between 11am to 1pm to see the wonderful work that goes on there. We are always looking for new members. Full details are available on the Society's webpage [www.wonthaggihistoricalsociety.org.au](http://www.wonthaggihistoricalsociety.org.au)

**Carolyn Landon, PLOD editor  
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