

When Major Thomas Mitchell, Surveyor General of New South Wales, crossed the Loddon River on September 27 1836, spring was at its best. To this point the journey homewards had been productive, but difficult. The continuous rain meant mud - on occasion so thick that the men and animals were exhausted from the effort needed to get through. For years afterwards the tracks left by the party were still to be seen and the *Major's Line* provided a guide for further adventurers.

Drought years followed through the 1840s, culminating in the bushfires which swept through most of Victoria on Black Thursday in February 1851.

By August 1854 a township was planned for an area surveyed to the north-west of the present town of Newstead, near the banks of the Loddon at Mingus' Crossing Place. The land was sub-divided and the sales began in Castlemaine on September 29 1854.

And then came the first flood to affect "Newstead". The Argus Newspaper, drawing from the Mount Alexander Mail of September 18 1855 reported "...On Monday morning the heaviest rains we have had this season came on, and have continued with very little intermission, to the present time. The creeks and rivers in the neighborhood are consequently full, and in some places heavy Floods have put a temporary check to communication...."

Needless to say, the plan for the township out on the river flats was cancelled and new plans were drawn up - for the town where it is today. And so the story began...

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Information contained in the family of brochures entitled Newstead Heritage Walks has been derived from the following sources:

- Bradfield, Ray: NEWSTEAD (undated)
- Taylor, Phil & Jacobs, Wendy: NEWSTEAD HERATAGE STUDY Stage 1, 1999
- Coady, Liz: A STORY OF EARLY NEWSTEAD, 2000, NDHS unpublished paper.
- NEWSTEAD DATA, the Newstead Historical Society's data base created from the work of Margaret Di Fiore & Janet Trudgeon and current reseach of members.

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# Newstead Heritage Walks

February 2016

## Floods



A Walk in the Shire of Mount Alexander

October 1916  
Watching the flood



Newstead & District Historical Society

Stand on the bridge

Imagine yourself Surrounded by flood waters

Explore Newstead's flood sites.....

Mount Alexander Shire Walks and Trails Advirory Committee

...and the floods continued.

On the morning of Tuesday, October 24 2000, Newstead residents woke once again to find themselves surrounded by water. In the 48 hours from Monday to Wednesday of that week, readings taken at 9.00am each day showed a total rainfall of 103.7mm (394 points). Standing here on the bridge (1) imagine the surging water covering the river flats, cutting off any access from the western end of the bridge. It was estimated that, on that Tuesday morning, the water would have reached the planking of the old Jenkin Bridge (off to the north-west, constructed in 1935), had it still existed.

It is difficult for us to understand from the perspective of the year 2000 why, when Flood waters made it necessary to abandon the original site for Newstead, the first commercial premises were still established around the Loddon River. The river must have altered considerably since those early days and perhaps it was considered that the river at this point was more manageable, and the area more commercially viable than others. In a letter to the Mount Alexander Mail of April 26 1861, Joseph Day wrote of 'Another Government Muddle', claiming that it was due to alterations to the natural flow of the water caused by the 'new bridge' (the first Government bridge, built in 1861) that had aggravated the problem. A later letter however, this time in the Echo of March 27 1907, suggests that '...the danger from Floods was as great then as now....' Joseph Day is also recorded as being the lessee of the punt (probably as collector of the tolls), and the punt (10) was one of the very early victims of excessive water. An account in the Mount Alexander Mail of November 11 1857 records that '...For some weeks past the punt has been sunk under the water ... and the first small Flood will probably carry it away bodily....' There is little to be seen at the site of the punt (one of Newstead's early mysteries) but it is interesting to stand here and try to imagine where the punt, and Joseph Day, once plied their trade. Today's statistics show that, above the Newstead Bridge, the Loddon has a catchment area of 1,040km<sup>2</sup> (without the contribution from Green Gully (Sandon)

or the Mia Mia), and that there is a 1% probability in every year that there will be a Flood. It is generally agreed that the worst flood on record was the one of August 19-20 1909 which devastated areas throughout the whole of the present Shire of Mount Alexander. On that occasion it rained from dusk until 8am the next morning, dumping 307 points (about 81mm) of rain on the former Shire of Newstead. By 2am the water had overflowed the river banks and was through the Newstead Hotel. (2) - Site of Newstead Hotel & Golden Way Sign (3) - high water mark on Mechanics' Institute. By 6am the water was 4 feet (1.2 metres) high for two blocks on both sides of the street to the steps of the Bank (5) in which those affected took refuge until daylight. At the General Store (4) Henry Colquhoun, like the captain of a ship, refused to leave and perched on the counter to continue business as best he could. Miss Roberts of Roberts General Store fame remembers hearing that Frederick Nomens (at his home (7) diagonally opposite the Bank), when he swung his legs out of bed to investigate the effect of the heavy rain, found himself up to his ankles in water. At the Old Post Office in Panmure Street (8), Miss Sullivan too, clutching the cash-box in her hand, conducted business atop the counter until the position became untenable and she was rescued by boat. Around in Layard Street the Victorian Flour Mill (9) suffered considerable damage, subsequently closing in 1914. One can imagine the devastating effect of the water on stocks of grain, both milled and unmilled.

After the 1909 flood, 'twenty-one owners and occupiers' affected by the flood determined that something must be done. Others were equally (but unreasonably?) determined that there would be no levee

bank, or at least not one supported by Council. In the Echo of June 22 1910 we read '...Crs Tankard and Hanley were going to oppose it tooth and nail, and play the devil generally. The latter (Hanley, not the devil) had railed against the project at every opportunity ... and swore that the council would never be allowed to carry the matter...' By November of the same year, the public meetings held, deputations to the Government over, funding arrangements resolved, the plans for a levee bank had been drawn up and, early in 1911, the contractor, Mr Ching, commenced work. Over the years since, the levee bank has been maintained, extended and developed, efficiently protecting the residents within its boundaries. Part of the efficiency is provided by the sluice gate (6), which is normally open to allow excessive rainwater to escape, and closed to prevent floodwater entering the township. At around 2.00am on the morning of October 24 2000, it was discovered that somehow the sluice gate had been closed and water was building up inside the levee bank. It was quickly opened but around 6.00am, with the flood waters threatening from outside, the sluice gate was again closed and the residents inside were safe.

