

Woolwashing 1863 – excerpts from a newspaper article

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Wool-washing on the Yarra

A quiet citizen of Melbourne, enjoying a boating excursion on the Yarra, will, if he proceeds as high as Studley Park Bridge, witness a scene which cannot fail to strike the uninitiated with a considerable degree of astonishment and perplexity. At four or five points of the river in that vicinity there is usually to be seen a number of men, varying from about six to two dozen, each with an enormous basket filled with some material, upon which he apparently sets great store. The baskets are constantly being plunged into the water, to be immediately dragged out, and plunged in again; or their contents are zealously turned over and stirred about by long staves, as though the men were searching for some hidden treasure. In some instances, the men and their baskets are stationed at the water's edge, the baskets being attached by cords to beams erected on the banks, and plunged to and fro. In other cases, the operation is carried on upon floating platforms, or rafts, in the middle of the stream, giving the men the appearance of shipwrecked mariners.

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They are engaged in washing wool, preparatory to its being shipped for England, and manufactured into cloth, blankets, and other goods.

Any process connected with the preparation of a substance of which more than 20,000,000 lb weight, of the declared value of upwards of £1,500,000, is annually exported from Victoria alone, must possess some interest.

[The writer talks of the Yarra Pollution Prevention Act which has stopped new fellmongeries on the river]

Mr Nettleton's ground occupies about two acres, with a river frontage of about ninety yards. The main building erected upon the ground is an excellent three storeyed structure, 100 feet long and thirty wide. The lower floor is built of stone, and the remainder of the building is principally brick. The ground-floor is divided into three compartments, two of which are used as sorting rooms, and the other as a packing and storing-room. The next storey consists of one room, running the entire length of the building, which is chiefly used for stowing away wool after it has been dried' and before it is packed. The top storey also consists of one room of the same dimensions, which is appropriated for drying purposes during the winter months, or in wet weather.

The other buildings erected on the ground are merely sheds.

Wool-washing is carried on to the greatest extent during the sheep shearing season - say, from October to April - although wool from the carcasses of sheep which have been killed for consumption find their way to the fellmongery, as well as shorn fleeces, and are "worked" all the year round. As far as the washing is concerned, the process is the same in both cases;

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After the wool has been sorted, it goes through a process called scouring. On Mr. Nettleton's premises, there is a large scouring pan, capable of holding 800 gallons of water. This water is kept constantly hot, and is mixed with a certain proportion of soap. The wool to be scoured is placed in a tub large enough for 100 pounds of it, and the hot water and soap are then added. The soap and

water soon soften the wool, rendering it much easier to wash, and it is then taken out of the tub, and placed on a drainer ... The scouring being completed, the wool is removed to the washers' baskets, and washed in the river Mr. Nettleton has substituted a sort of box for the basket, the bottom of which is made of galvanized iron, perforated. There are ten men, each of whom is provided with one of these boxes or baskets, and with a wooden staff some six feet long and six inches in circumference. The bottoms of the baskets are below the surface of the river, and the water accordingly rises in the baskets. The men knock the wool about rapidly with their staves in order that the fibres of the wool may be separated, and all the "yolk" or grease washed out of it, as well as the dirt, mud other rubbish which is collected by all sheep in a greater or less degree. The process is a laborious one, and it requires considerable time before the whole of the superfluous matter is removed. As he makes progress with the work, the washer gives his basket a swing in the river, and the motion washes away the sediment which has fallen to the bottom of the basket, while, at the same time, it lets in a fresh supply of water for continuing the operation. Gradually the surface of the river changes from the muddy, dirty, greasy appearance which it presents shortly after the washing commences, until there is little or no discoloration. The contents of the basket have also undergone a similar metamorphosis, and the washing is completed.

[It is then spread out to dry, either outside or in the top room and the importance of the north facing aspect is emphasised for this.]

[The article also discusses the potential for developing woollen manufacturing in Victoria as the wool at that stage was for export.]