Forest camps played an important part in the operations of the Forest Commission Victoria (FCV).

Camps were established for timber assessment, road construction, softwood plantation establishment and fire suppression.

They were also established on state forest for unemployment relief programs as well as housing POWs and refugees.

In later years they were used for staff training.

Forest camps were particularly important in an era before the state forest road network was well established and before reliable vehicle transport made daily commuting to a nearby town a possibility.

Depending on the nature and use of the camp, people could be accommodated for periods of several days, weeks or months and in the case of POW and refugee camps, even years.

The camps varied in complexity and construction materials from permanent hard roof buildings with basic facilities such as Mt Disappointment or Shelley through to more transient road construction and forest assessment camps in the eastern mountains which were often used for one or two seasons or until the project was completed. These were constructed with a mixture of tents and temporary buildings.

Camps could also be makeshift and constructed of whatever material was at hand like at Cowombat Flat at the headwaters of the Murray River where the fuselage of a crashed Dakota was assembled into a shelter.

Temporary assessment camps were often transported on pack horse so all provisions needed to be light and portable.

Facilities were mostly rudimentary with water drawn from nearby rivers and heating and cooking from wood stoves. Timber Stanley huts were uninsulated and bleak in winter and stifling in summer. Sometimes power was available from generators but the lighting was often from kerosene lamps. Communications by radio with the outside world was possible from the 1940s.

Catering was a mixture of communal mess halls with an often eccentric camp cook or staff self-catered. Hunting and fishing were a common means of supplementing rations.

Whereas, fire basecamps by their very nature were temporary and often quickly established in a small clearing near a river and close to the fire. They were initially primitive affairs with tents and mobile caravans so it was wise for fire crews to come away and expect to remain pretty self-sufficient for the first 48 hours or so. But over time fire basecamps became more comfortable and well organised with hot showers, toilets, 240V power, medical services and decent cooked food.

The use of the more permanent camps evolved over time. Mt Disappointment (aka Broadford), for example, was used as a Forest Foreman school from the late 1950s until about 1968.

Some camps were later leased to schools and community groups when no longer required by the Commission.

Many forest camps were used for forestry students on vacation work but changing standards and staff expectations combined with high maintenance costs, bushfires and vandalism has meant that all but a few camps now remain.

Stanley Huts

The origins of the humble but ubiquitous Stanley Hut remains a bit of mystery. The consensus seems that they were named after an engineer employed by the Forests Commission (or at least the State Government).

The huts were prefabricated at the Commission’s seasoning workshop at Newport in large numbers from the 1930s through to the mid-1950s when Newport closed.

The huts came as “flat-packs” and could be easily transported, assembled and disassembled for movement. Sometimes they were even mounted on timber skids rather than permanent stumps so they could be repositioned.
The simple rectangular buildings were easy to build without power tools and were clad in Masonite and other lightweight materials like Asbestos Cement (A/C) sheet while the roof was either corrugated iron or a bituminous waterproofing product called malthoid.

Thousands of Stanley Huts were manufactured with variations of the design and they were also used by other government agencies such as the State Electricity Commission, Country Roads Board and State Rivers and Water Supply Commission.

Being portable and robust Stanley Huts were regularly relocated and many ended up in FCV depots where they were used as either storage or primitive single-man’s quarters. Some were modified and joined together to make larger and more comfortable accommodation for families.

1930s Unemployment relief camps.

Although revenue from timber sales declined during the 1930s Great Depression the Government channelled substantial funds to the Commission for unemployment relief works which were well suited to unskilled manual labour such as firebreak slashing, silvicultural thinning, weed spraying and rabbit control.

Temporary and semi-permanent camps sprang up right across Victoria’s State forests.

By 1935-36 the Commission employed almost 9000 men for periods of up to eight weeks at a time. The camps generally comprised 25 men with two-thirds being from the city. And despite the blisters, many remained in the country to make their future.

However, there was a particular need to provide opportunities for young people. One success story was at "Boys Camp" near Noojee which was made possible with the support of two prominent Melbourne businessmen and philanthropists, Herbert Robinson Brooks and George Richard Nicholas together with the Chairman of the Commission A. V. Galbraith. A further 15 camps were established across Victoria.

1939-45 POW and Internee camps.

Australian authorities established internment and POW camps for three reasons – to prevent residents from assisting Australia's enemies, to appease public opinion and to house overseas internees sent to Australia for the duration of the war.

Australia interned about 7000 residents during World War II. A further 8000 people were sent to Australia to be interned after being detained overseas by Australia's allies. At its peak in 1942, more than 12,000 people were interned in Australia.

Prisoners of War were categorised slightly differently with most of the Italian prisoners having been captured during the North Africa campaign while the Germans were from the Raider Kormoran which sank of WA coast in 1941.

The camps in the forests were secret. It is still unclear exactly how many camps operated and little remains in the archives or in the bush to betray their whereabouts. Reports on the camps are poor and contradictory. There were at least nine camps with 40 km of Healesville. Five being at
Mt Disappointment and three at Broadford. Others are known near Gembrook.

In 1942 the Australian War Cabinet approved a scheme that utilised the labour of Italian POWs but directed that no publicity was to be given the scheme in its infant stages. The scheme was innovative and well planned, satisfying the Geneva Conventions guidelines that both minimised expenses and supervision by the Army.

The Forests Commission was desperately short of manpower in the war years and took up the option of establishing several work camps by mid-1944. The Army paid one Pound per week per prisoner for provide food, tools and accommodation for both prisoners and army personnel. The Commission was allocated 300 POWs who were sent to Broadford and Kinglake. A request for a further 500-700 men was made in September 1943.

Productivity of the prisoners was variable and depended on their skills and motivation. The Divisional Forester, C H G Pavey was optimistic initially and wrote in 1944.

“Although the prisoners had no previous experience in wood cutting and were greatly handicapped by not being able to speak English, they had rapidly adapted themselves to work and seemed to take interest in it. We are hopeful that production figures will prove the venture well worth the trouble.”

In the following year was not a great success he reported. The Italian prisoners in particular did not have close military supervision. However under the heading vermin, noxious weeds and fungi, Pavey noted the area in which the POWs operated was most successful. Vermin in the form of wombats, wallabies, wild dog, etc have much reduced because of the Italians likening for meat in their diet.

Many of the unemployment relief camps from the 1930s were repurposed and some new ones built to house Italian and German Internees and POW’s who then worked to produce firewood and charcoal for Melbourne. Some of these sites include:

- Mt Disappointment / Broadford (1,3 &3)
- Whroo for Italians (Rushworth)
- Graytown for Germans (Rushworth).
- Spences Bridge (Gunbower Island).
- Tatura.

Many of the facilities were very low-security such as Mt Disappointment where detainees and POWs were not locked in and had a free range of the vicinity. But there was a breakout of 21 German prisoners who tunnelled under the barbed wire at Graytown in January 1945.

The Graytown camp was established for internees and POWs from the German warship the Kormoran. Circa 1943. Source: National Archives.
Graytown, 1943. German POWs felling a large tree for firewood.
Source: National Archives.

Camps No 1, 2 & 3 were set up in the Mount Disappointment State Forest during WW2 to house alien internees and later Italian Prisoners Of War. No.1 Camp was also known as the Broadford or Strath Alien Camp.

During the latter years of WW2, two sets of six charcoal kilns were established at Mt Disappointment and a powder magazine was constructed to store gelignite used for the construction of roads.

The forest camps were dismantled after the war or put to other uses. Camp No1 at Mt Disappointment was used by the Commission for training until about 1968 but was destroyed on Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 and Camp number 2 was leased to Camberwell Grammar school.

Post War refugee camps
At the end of the War, some of the camps were used to house refugees and new immigrants fleeing Europe while some were decommissioned.

The Forests Commission built a new camp next to the Aire Valley Redwoods in March 1948 which consisted of a kitchen cookhouse and mess, shower block, toilets, woodshed and eighteen small two-man Stanley Huts.

The Aire Valley camp in the Otway’s was situated next to the famous redwood plantation and was established primarily for refugees.

The bulk of the planting work in the Aire Valley Plantation was then done by post-war immigrants and refugees from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The first batch of "Balts" as they became known, arrived at Colac in April 1949 and lived in the Aire Valley Camp for up to two years as part of their government-sponsored resettlement program. It was reportedly a bleak existence, particularly in winter, but they made the camp comfortable.

Other refugees and immigrants helped build projects like the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

Other plantation camps in the Otway’s were established at different times at Halls, Congrams, Seaview and the Redwoods.

Soldier repatriation camps
After the cessation of war hostilities, the Kallista District of the Forests Commission advised in February 1946 that they could absorb 40 returned servicemen for silvicultural, afforestation, fire
protection, and utilisation works. This was part of a five-year statewide plan drawn up and approved by the Allied Works Council with funding allocated for the first two-year period totalling £3,842,175.

To provide accommodation, eighteen masonite huts were purchased from the Army and erected at the site. By July 1946 the Commission decided to make Kurth Kiln its main base camp for the region to house 80 to 100 men.

The site remained an active works camp until 1963.

Forest training camps.

Many forest camps were again repurposed and used for fire training programs for staff and crews. Broadford and Too-Rour were used well into the 1980s.

However, in the mid-1970s the Forests Commission shifted training for forest foreman to the Victorian School of Forestry at Creswick and built more huts at the rear of the school affectionately known as Siberia.
Road construction camps.

During the post-war and post 1939 fire salvage periods there was an eastwards shift of Victoria’s timber industry with a massive expansion of the forest roads and tracks network by almost a thousand kilometres in some years. Major construction projects such as the Tamboritha and Moroka Roads north of Licola in Gippsland and the Big River Road in northeast Victoria were blasted through the rugged mountains to access new timber resources and provide much-needed fire access.

Often semi-permanent in nature with a mixture of roofed and tent accommodation and used until the road project was completed.

- Surveyors Creek (Heyfield)
- Engineers Road (Bruthen)
- Donald’s Knob (Cann River)
- Errinundra Plateau (Orbost)
- Big River Road (Marysville).
- Forest Lodge, Victoria Valley (Stawell).

Surveyors Creek, north of Licola is still used as a fire basecamp.

Forest assessment camps.

Mostly established in the eastern mountainous parts of Victoria during the 1950s and 1960s. Short term in nature. Sometimes using cattlemen’s huts as a base or tents brought in on a truck or pack horse.

Engineers Camp – Stanley huts and tents. Donald’s Knob (1952) – source Athol Hodgson.

These camps were semi-portable and were commonly moved at the completion of the forest assessment program.

Sometimes camps were very makeshift. One camp was built from the scrounged wreckage of DC3 Dakota that crashed in 1954 at Cowombat Flat in the headwaters of the Murray River.

Plantation camps.

Established to house staff and works crews associated with the softwood plantation extension (PX) program which accelerated in the early 1960s. Many camps were used for prolonged periods and became well serviced.

- Too-Rour (Benalla).
- Shelley-Koetong (Tallangatta).
- Rennick-Kentbruck
- Bright.
- Warwick (Mt Cole).
- Bullarto South (Ballarat).
- Aire Valley Plantation (Otways).
- Anglesea
- Morwell River Prison (Mirboo North)
- Won Wron Prison (Yarram)

*Shelley – Koetong Camp – Jan 1969. Source Ian Hastings*


*Bullarto South camp – circa 1940. Source: Jack Gittins.*

*Seedlings were hand planted on the steep hillsides by prisoners. Circa 1977. Source FCV annual report*

In the case of the reforestation program in the Strzelecki Ranges in South Gippsland, there were two low-security prison camps operating large nurseries. One at Morwell River produced over one million eucalypt seedlings each year while another near Yarram at Won Wron grew pines. Forests Commission staff supervised the nursery and planting operations while warders supervised the prison crews.

**Towermen’s camps.**

At some remote fire towers across the eastern mountains, a small hut was provided for the tower man. They often worked long days on seven-day shifts and made them quite comfortable.
View from the old Pinnacles tower north of Briagolong. It burnt down in December 2006 and was replaced. It also had a small tower man’s hut. Circa 1980. Source Peter McHugh.


**Fire basecamps.**

Fire basecamps were often quickly set up close to the fire edge in a clearing near a river or stream. The accommodation was mostly in tents. Mobile caravans were sometimes used for preparing meals.