

# **Rootes Ltd**

# **Factory [former]**

## **19-25 Salmon Street, Port Melbourne**

## **HERITAGE ASSESSMENT**

**Prepared jointly for**

**Art Deco & Modernism Society, Inc**

**National Trust of Australia (Victoria)**

**Port Melbourne Historical & Preservation Society**

**23 July 2015**



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# A: INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND & BRIEF

In the *Fishermans Bend Heritage Study*, commissioned by Places Victoria and completed by Biosis Pty Ltd in June 2013, the subject site (referred to as the Rootes/Chrysler factory, 11–19 [sic] Salmon and Plummer Streets) was identified as one of seven places “recommended for further investigation with a view to inclusion on the Heritage Overlay”.

The present report was jointly commissioned by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria), the Art Deco & Modernism Society, Inc (ADMS) and the Port Melbourne Historical & Preservation Society. The brief was as follows:

*With respect to the work undertaken in 2013 by Biosis for 19–25 Salmon Street, and with regard for the finding by Biosis that the place has local heritage significance and that further investigation should be undertaken, please prepare a detailed site history, contextual analysis, brief comparative analysis, and heritage significance assessment of the site. Depending on your findings, the National Trust and other stakeholders may wish to advocate for an interim heritage control under the local heritage overlay or other appropriate heritage control.*

## SITE DETAILS

### Names/s

1941–43	Department of Munitions: experimental tank depot
1943–46	Department of Aircraft Production (Maintenance Division): factory/store
1946–66	Rootes Ltd factory [company known as Rootes (Australia) Pty Ltd after 1954]
1966–72	Chrysler (Australia) Ltd factory

### Address

19–25 Salmon Street, Port Melbourne

*Note that two rear tenancies are separately addressed as 20 and 30 Smith Street, and another one along the north frontage is separately addressed as 380 Plummer Street. In this report, the Salmon Street address is deemed to refer to the entire complex bounded by Salmon, Plummer and Smith Streets*

### Local Government Area

City of Port Phillip

## **EXISTING HERITAGE LISTINGS**

### **City of Port Phillip**

The subject site is not currently included in the Heritage Overlay Schedule to the City of Port Phillip Planning Scheme, either as an individual heritage place or as part of a broader heritage precinct.

### **National Trust of Australia (Victoria)**

The subject site is not classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

### **Register of the National Estate (former)**

Not recorded.

## **AUTHORSHIP**

This report was prepared by Simon Reeves, director and principal of Built Heritage Pty Ltd.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Due to the limited amount of time available to prepare this report, it was not possible for the consultant to undertake his own inspection of the subject site. For this report, reliance was made on recent photographs that were taken by representatives of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria), during a site visit on 9 July 2015. Similarly, historical research was limited to published secondary sources and select primary sources that are readily available online, such as digitized newspapers, historical maps, aerial photographs and other illustrative material. It is expected that further information on the building, particularly relating to its governmental, occupation, would exist in the National Archives of Australia. While examination of these archival records would certainly add to the body of knowledge on the building, the limited research undertaken to date is deemed to have been sufficient to establish a case for local significance.

## **CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

For associations with its respective occupation by the Department of Munitions, the Department of Aircraft Productions and car manufacturers Rootes Ltd, the complex is deemed to be of historic and aesthetic significance at the local level. As such, an individual heritage overlay is deemed appropriate.

For its specific associations with the Commonwealth government's top secret tank manufacture programme, which prompted the construction of the building in 1941, the earliest part of the building is considered to be potentially of significance at the state level.

## **B: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

### **PREAMBLE**

Erected during 1941, the former factory complex at 19–25 Salmon Street, Port Melbourne, had no fewer than three different occupants during the first six years of its existence. These consisted of divisions of two separate government departments, each engaged in different types of war-related manufacture, followed in 1946 by a private enterprise that would remain headquartered in the building for two decades. Each of these three key phases of the building's occupation and use are imbued with their own associations of cultural significance and will be discussed separately.

- Department of Munitions [experimental tank depot, 1941–43]
- Department of Aircraft Production (Maintenance Division) [factory/store, 1943–46]
- Rootes Ltd/Chrysler Australia Ltd [vehicle factory, 1946–72]

### **DEPARTMENT OF MUNITIONS (TANK DEPOT)**

#### **Background to tank manufacture**

The Australian government's ambitious but ultimately short-lived attempt to manufacture tanks locally during the Second World War is documented in Peter Beale's definitive study, *Fallen Sentinels: Australian Tanks in World War II* (2011). Ultimately, the programme traced its origins back to December 1940, when Percy Spender, then Minister for the Army, presented the Military Board's proposal for the establishment of an armoured division. Early the following year, approval was given for the creation of an Australian Armoured Corps, as well as the raising of the required personnel (across the engineering, signal and ordnance corps) and the establishment of two training regiments and an AFV (Armoured Fighting Vehicle) training school.

By that time, plans were already underway for the design and manufacture of the tanks themselves. A British artillery officer, Colonel W D Watson, arrived in Australia in December 1940 to consult on the project, and technical officers of the newly-created Design & Development Section obtained "a great deal of technical data and assistance from the US authorities". By February 1941, a tank design (designated as the Australian Cruiser, Mark 1, or AC1) had already reached mock-up stage, with detailed design progressing swiftly thereafter. At that time, it was optimistically estimated that the first Australian-made tank would be completed by November. However, this timeline proved to be too optimistic; much more research needed to be done, and many complex technical issues (for example, the preferred methods of armour-plating and riveting) needed to be ironed out. These matters were subject to countless meetings and discussions during 1941.

## Experimental Tank Depot, Port Melbourne

During this prolonged period of design development, it was proposed to establish an experimental tank depot in Melbourne. On 23 July 1941, a report of the Director-General of Munitions stated that this depot, occupying a 9½ acre site at Fishermen’s Bend, was almost half completed (Figure 1). Although the presence of the new building was recorded in the street-by-street section of the *Sands & McDougall Directory* in 1942–43, it was identified only as the Department of Munitions “experimental works”, in what was clearly an attempt to keep the nature of its operation under wraps.

Given the top secret status of the tank programme, it is not surprising that little seems to be recorded of the experimental depot, even in Beale’s book. Major-General Ronald Hopkins, who was involved in the tank project from the beginning, recalled many years later that “Colonel Watson established a workshop in South Melbourne where he installed a team of carpenters and commenced building wooden mock-ups of his designs. As the General Staff representative, I spent many hours there discussing and testing various alternatives for the arrangement of crew and armaments”.<sup>1</sup>

## Aftermath of tank programme

In any case, development of the tank programme came to a fore towards the end of 1941, when it was resolved to proceed with the manufacture of the AC1 while abandoning any further development of a variant design, the AC2. Construction of the tanks did not take place in Melbourne but rather in Sydney, where the state government railway workshops at Chullora had been taken over as a top secret manufacturing facility for munitions, aircraft components and other requirements. A dedicated tank assembly annexe, in the form of a simple shed-like building measuring 500 feet by 140 feet, was duly constructed.<sup>2</sup> Tank production commenced in February 1942 and the first examples of the AC1 (by then, informally referred to as the *Sentine*) emerged in August.

Ultimately, the Australian government’s wartime tank building programme was not a success. One senior member of military staff later recalled that, by mid-1942, “only a few tanks had been built, the timetable was in arrears and even the design had become out of date”.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, only 65 examples of the AC1 were manufactured (rather than the hundreds originally envisaged), and, although they were tested and used for training, none of them ever saw active service. The tank programme was terminated in July 1943, when the government resolved that its resources would be better expended in supporting the arrival of tanks from the USA.

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1 R N L Hopkins, *Australian Armour: A History of the Royal Australian Armoured Corps, 1927-1972*, p 60.

2 Jim Longworth, *Boilers, Beauforts & Bogies: Chullora Locomotive & Rolling Stock Workshops, 1913-2000*, p 53.

3 *Australian Armour*, p 57.

## DEPARTMENT OF AIRCRAFT PRODUCTION (FACTORY/STORE)

With the termination of the tank programme in 1943, its former experimental depot was taken over by another government body, the Department of Aircraft Production (DAP). By that time, Fishermen's Bend was well-established as an epicentre for Australia's burgeoning aviation industry. Following the opening of a government aerodrome in 1936, several businesses engaged in related industries sprang up in the area, notably the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation (CAC) on Lorimer Street (1937), as well as smaller specialist manufacturers such as Fireproof Tanks Ltd on Salmon Street (1942), which made bullet-proof fuel tanks for wartime aircraft. The DAP had established a presence in the area in 1940, when a factory was built on Lorimer Street, next to the existing CAC premises (and with direct access to the government aerodrome), to manufacture Beaufort bombers.

Thus, when the DAP took over the former experimental tank depot in Salmon Street three years later, it was merely expanding its existing presence in the region. Given that the building did not provide direct access to the aerodrome (unlike its counterpart on Lorimer Street), it was not actually intended to operate as an annexe to the Beaufort Division. Rather, it was to become the headquarters of the second of the DAP's two branches: the Maintenance Division. As shown on an organisational chart, the DAP Maintenance Division was controlled by team of senior staff that comprised a maintenance manager, administrative manager, engineering/operations manager, project controller, supply manager, chief inspector and consulting architect. The division had taken over the Salmon Street premises by May 1944, when a newspaper advertised for administrative support staff ("typists, clerical assistance and stenographers") to work at the Department of Aircraft Production, Maintenance Division, Salmon Street, Port Melbourne.<sup>4</sup>

In early August 1945, as the war drew to a close, the DAP Maintenance Division was re-badged as the Maintenance & Disposals Division.<sup>5</sup> Over the following weeks, it called tenders for the purchase of surplus equipment such as tools, hardware and, in one notable instance, 70 tons of lead hammer dies from the nearby CAC factory.<sup>6</sup> Later re-named the DAP Supply & Disposals Branch (and, later still, as the Disposals Branch), it continued to operate from Salmon Street in early 1946, during which time the building was referred to as the "DAP Store" or "DAP Case Depot".<sup>7</sup> A typical newspaper advertisement from that time reported that "substantial quantities of aluminium materials, in ingots, sheets, bars strip, tubes and wire", were available for purchase upon enquiry to E V Tume, the Disposals Manager of the Department of Aircraft Production, Salmon Street, Port Melbourne.<sup>8</sup>

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4 'Professional engagements', *Argus*, 13 May 1944, p 18.

5 'Tenders', *Argus*, 28 August 1945, p 14.

6 'Tenders', *Argus*, 18 September 1945, p 14.

7 'Tenders', *Argus*, 16 February 1946, p 25, and 27 February 1946, p 17.

8 *Argus*, 15 April 1946.



*Figure 1: View of the factory during its original governmental occupation, circa 1941  
(source Harold Paynting Collection, Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)*



*Figure 2: View of the factory during its early occupation by Rootes, Ltd, circa 1946  
(source: Item L1647, Series A1200, National Archives of Australia)*



## **ROOTES LTD/CHRYSLER AUSTRALIA LTD (VEHICLE FACTORY)**

With the factory in use as a wartime surplus depot from late 1945, the government was no doubt aware that the building itself would soon become surplus to its requirements. Finding a new use, however, would not prove too challenging. By early 1946, a leading British firm of car manufacturers had expressed interest in setting up a factory in Australia. This company, Rootes Ltd, traced its origins back to 1913, when brothers William and Reginald Rootes formed a car dealership in Kent.<sup>9</sup> The burgeoning company expanded into manufacture in the later 1920s when it acquired the ailing firms responsible for making Hillman and Humber cars, and Commer commercial vehicles. After a few false starts, the company generated huge commercial success with the introduction of the Hillman Minx in 1932. By the end of the decade, it had become one of Britain's leading car manufacturers.

Rootes Ltd saw the market potential in Australia as early as 1930, when the company appointed C E Blayney as its Australian representative. Based in Sydney, he travelled to the other state capitals to let contracts for locally-made products such as Dunlop tyres and Lucas car batteries. W H Johnson, a senior associate of Rootes Ltd, visited Australia in 1933 as part of a world tour investigating the potential export market; sadly, he died of appendicitis in Launceston and never completed his mission. In early 1939, the company dispatched its export manager, L C Cunningham, on a five-month tour of Australia and New Zealand; at the time, it was reported that William Rootes himself would visit in November "and a decision would be made in regard to definite operations here".<sup>10</sup> But his visit, along with plans to start local manufacture, were curtailed indefinitely by the Second World War.

In January 1946, Australia's Minister for Post-War Reconstruction announced that negotiations were underway for two (unnamed) overseas companies to establish factories here. It was hardly mindless speculation when, several days later, a newspaper revealed that "it was stated on high authority that Rootes Ltd had secured from the Federal Government occupancy of an armoured vehicles plant at Fishermen's Bend, Melbourne, and would assemble or produce motor cars". Victoria's Premier, John Cain, eager to have the company established in Victoria, had reportedly brought the company's attention to a number of possible factory sites before agreement was reached to take over the premises in Salmon Street.<sup>11</sup> The deal was secured by G AW Laird, the long-serving Manager of Overseas Production for Rootes Ltd, who had flown to Australia "immediately following the end of World War Two" to ensure that local production could commence as soon as possible.<sup>12</sup> Laird, who would later become managing director of the company's Australian offshoot, took responsibility for "acquiring, tooling and staffing the Rootes Group factory at Port Melbourne" (Figure 2).

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9 'Rootes is life story of two brothers', *Argus*, 12 August 1955, p 26.

10 'Personal', *West Australian*, 8 June 1939, p 16.

11 'Site in Victoria for British car factory', *Argus*, 21 February 1946, p 5.

12 'Top man at Rootes Australia', *Argus*, 12 August 1955, p 31.



*Figure 3: Aerial photograph dated 9 May 1946, looking down onto the factory site (source: Aerial Survey of Victoria, Map Collection, University of Melbourne)*



*Figure 4: Aerial photograph of the factory, circa 1947, looking west across Salmon Street (source: Item L1849, Series A1200, National Archives of Australia)*

In April 1946, Rootes Ltd officially became registered as a company in Victoria.<sup>13</sup> At the time, it was reported that “details of the conversion of the wear factory to motor production were completed some time ago, in anticipation of the negotiations being successful”.<sup>14</sup> With production slated to begin the following month, the company stated that it intended to manufacture its Humber, Hillman and Sunbeam-Talbot cars, along with its Commer and Karrier trucks, a rate of 6,000 to 8,000 vehicles per annum. Much emphasis was placed on the use of local resources, with the company indicating that it would “draw extensively on Australian resources for materials” and that only Australian personnel would be employed, “apart from a number of specialists in key positions”.

Two aerial photographs, dating from the mid-1940s, show the extent of the factory complex around the time it was taken over by Rootes Ltd (Figures 3 and 4). It then comprised the main production building on Salmon Street, with the hip-roofed front administrative block and sawtooth-roofed rear production area creating a squat rectangular footprint, approximately one-third of its present-day size. There was a gable-roofed detached block to the immediate south, also facing Salmon Street (now demolished), and a larger four-bay sawtooth-roofed building further west, fronting Smith Street.

When Rootes Ltd commenced production in Port Melbourne 1946, the factory employed 160 people and would produce 2,600 vehicles during its first year. By 1948, the number of employees had risen to 617, and the annual vehicle output increased to 3,800. Production figures had doubled by the following year, by which time the factory employed some 900 people.<sup>15</sup> Business was clearly booming. By the early 1950s, operations expanded as the company took over a building on the opposite side of Salmon Street, which was evidently used for storage. In March 1954, when the enterprise was re-configured as a public company under the name, Rootes (Australia) Pty Ltd, it was reported that “demand for Rootes products greatly exceeded the present factory output capacity” and, consequently, an extensive building programme would be initiated as “the first step towards complete vehicle manufacture”.<sup>16</sup>

Undertaken by leading building contractors John Holland Pty Ltd, the huge expansion project was completed in fifteen months at a cost of one million pounds. The programme included the enlargement of the main assembly building by 117,000 square feet (including a synthetic paint plant that would be described as the most modern in the Southern Hemisphere), as well as a canteen for 800 people, a new spare parts building and a medical centre with surgery and X-ray equipment.<sup>17</sup>

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13 ‘Rootes Ltd registered’, *Age*, 18 April 1946.

14 ‘Another car factory: Rootes Group plan for Australia’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1946, p 1.

15 ‘Rootes Australia’, *Argus*, 12 August 1955, p 25.

16 ‘Rootes to make public issue’ *Argus*, 5 March 1954, p 14.

17 ‘£1m extension at Rootes open today’, *Argus*, 11 August 1955, p 9.

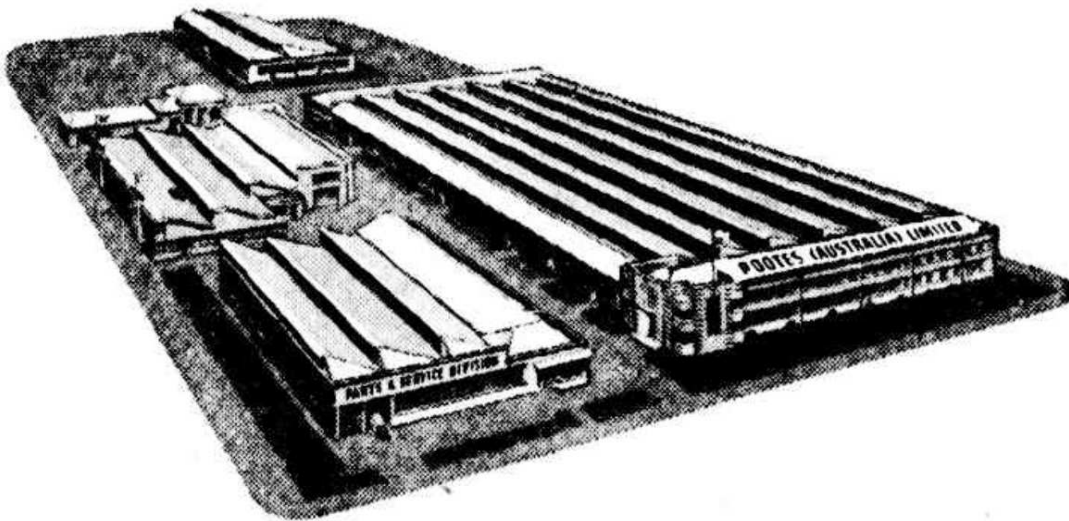


Figure 5: *Perspective showing the factory complex following 1955 additions*  
(source: Argus, 12 August 1955, p 40)



Figure 6: *Aerial photograph looking south west, showing factory in the mid-1950s*  
(source: www.sunbeam.org.au)

When the enlarged complex was officially opened on 11 August 1955 by the Governor of Victoria, Sir Dallas Brooks, the event was deemed of sufficient importance for the *Argus* newspaper to publish a 17-page souvenir supplement to that day's edition. This included a perspective drawing (Figure 5) showing the extent of the complex at the time. Newly extended, the original building now occupied the entire northern half of the block bounded by Salmon, Plummer and Smith Street. The detached block to the south of the main building was enlarged by another three bays to form the new Parts & Service Division. Expansion continued further west, with a smaller detached gabled-roofed building on the other side of Smith Street (now No 21). Directories indicate that, by 1961, further expansion had taken place along that frontage with another large building alongside (now No 19), extending along Plummer Street. This is evident in an aerial photograph, circa early 1960s (Figure 7).

In March 1962, it was reported that Rootes Ltd was once again “considering large scale expansion of its Port Melbourne plant”.<sup>18</sup> This was consequent to a recent tour of the firm's Australian facilities by its one of its British managing directors, Geoffrey Rootes, who reported that he was “immensely impressed by the enormous scope for development in Australia”. Specifically, the company was keen to begin the local manufacture and distribution of the latest addition to its range: a new rear-engined four-seater small car that was already in production at the new Rootes Group factory in Scotland. The following year, it was reported that a sum of £250,000 had been spent on upgrading the Port Melbourne factory for the production of what was revealed to be the Hillman Imp.<sup>19</sup> By that time, the factory employed 1,350 people and was producing one hundred vehicles per day.

By the mid-1960s, the popularity of cars in the Rootes Ltd range had declined in both Great Britain and Australia. In December 1965, the firm's Australian branch merged with rivals Chrysler Australia Ltd, which had operated since 1951. A large sum was spent upgrading the Port Melbourne factory, which was to continue to make Hillman cars and Commer vans, as well as Chrysler's own Dodge Phoenix.<sup>20</sup> However, an official report stated that “the amalgamation of Rootes Australia Ltd did not add to the company's profits for 1966”. Eventually, production was consolidated at Chrysler's plant in Adelaide and, in April 1972, it was announced that the Port Melbourne factory would close. It then employed 500 people and produced Hunter, Dodge Phoenix and Colt cars. The company's official stance was that “it was rationalizing its operations because of the lull in industry activity and expansion difficulties at Port Melbourne”.<sup>21</sup> The site, covering 15 acres and providing 445,000 square feet of space, was offered for auction in September 1972 but was passed in at \$3.1 million.<sup>22</sup>

18 ‘Rootes plans expansion in Australia’, *Age*, 16 March 1962, p 11.

19 ‘Rootes’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 June 1963, p 12.

20 ‘Chrysler in 15% decline’, *Age*, 25 May 1967, p 6.

21 ‘Chrysler to shut down its Victorian operation’, *Age*, 5 April 1972, p 1.

22 ‘\$3.1 million not enough for Chrysler site’, *Age*, 21 September 1972, p 7.



*Figure 7: Aerial photograph looking west, showing the factory, circa early 1960s [note additions that including two additional bays towards Williamstown Road, and new four-bay building on southwest corner of Smith and Plummer Streets, which was subsequently extended even further along the Plummer Street frontage] (source: [www.sunbeam.org.au](http://www.sunbeam.org.au))*

## C: DESCRIPTION

### HISTORICAL EXTENT

Historically, the former Rootes Ltd factory complex comprises several separate buildings spread over a large area that is nominally defined by Salmon Street, Plummer Street, Williamstown Road and almost as far as Prohasky Street (Figure 8).

The principal building at 19–25 Salmon Street, which represents the largest and earliest structure in the complex, occupies the entire northern half of the block bounded by Salmon Street, Plummer Street and Smith Street. A smaller (but still quite substantial) building occupies the south–west corner of the same block, with frontages to Smith Street and Williamstown Road. These buildings appear to have been much altered, enlarged, or even demolished and rebuilt, since the Rootes Ltd era.

In addition, there are several buildings on the opposite (west) side of Smith Street that were once part of the Rootes Ltd complex. These include the large sawtoothed–roof building at the corner of Plummer Street (addressed as 19 Smith Street and 320–332 Plummer Street) and a smaller freestanding gable–roofed building alongside (21 Smith Street). At least two other buildings that once formed part of the Rootes Ltd complex are confirmed to have been demolished. These comprise the former Parts & Service Division at 11 Salmon Street (now a low–rise office block) and another building on the opposite (east) side of Salmon Street, between Plummer and Lorimer Streets, which was taken over by Rootes Ltd in the early 1950s.

### PRINCIPAL BUILDING

The principal building at 19–25 Salmon Street is made up of several discrete but connected elements. Effectively, it comprises a sprawling single–storey sawtooth–roofed structure with a two–storey hip–roofed wing facing Salmon Street, and smaller ancillary structures to the rear (Smith Street) side.

#### **Production wing**

The sawtooth–roofed portion, which once accommodated the production areas, is entirely utilitarian in form, materials and detail. Its side elevations (north and south) are expressed in a simple tripartite fashion, with a long bay of multi–paned metal–framed windows (incorporating a several doorways and vehicle entrances with steel roller shutters), flanked by a continuous brick spandrel below and continuous panel of vertically corrugated cement sheeting above. Much of this elevational treatment appears to remain intact, except for a small portion where a new showroom fitout, with modern full–height windows and signage, has been inserted for a car repair tenancy at 380 Plummer Street.



Figure 8 Current aerial photograph, colour-coded to indicate phases of construction: pre-1945 (red outline), 1955 (orange outline) and post-1955 (yellow outline).

Towards the east (Smith Street) end, the production building increases to two-storey height, with a concealed gambrel roof but with identical elevational treatment to Plummer Street. Two buildings front Smith Street: one attached to the larger production building and the other detached. These two annexes, which face each other across a concrete driveway, present blank brick facades to the street. The larger detached building, designated as 20 Smith Street, has an elongated rectangular plan form with a low gabled roof. The smaller attached building, designated as 30 Smith Street, is flat roofed, with its exposed south facade clad with vertical corrugated cement sheeting.

### Administration wing

Two storeys high with an elongated L-shaped plan form, the former administration building on Salmon Street has a hipped roof clad in corrugated cement sheeting (Figure 9). This roofing is original, and the outline of former painted signage, stating the words ROOTES LTD, still remains evident. The bulk of the Salmon Street façade has a simple utilitarian expression that is not dissimilar to that of the two side elevations: continuous bays of multi-paned metal framed windows, each with panels of vertical corrugated cement sheeting above, and a painted brick spandrel at ground level. At ground level, a portion of the facade has been replaced by a new commercial shopfront, with full-height windows and glazed doors, to accommodate a car showroom.



At the south end of the Salmon Street frontage, this generally utilitarian expression gives way to a greater degree of architectural pretension. Here, the elevation is punctuated by a slightly projecting wing with a central rendered bay that rises to form a capped parapet with central flagstaff. Symmetrical in expression, this element has a central bay of four multi-paned vertical strip windows, delineated by fin-like piers, flanked by two slightly recessed and rusticated corners. Around the corner, facing south, a second rendered bay defines the main entrance to the administration building. This is similarly treated, with another bay of vertical strip windows that gives way to a recessed entry porch at ground level. This bay is also flanked by rusticated corners and, instead of a flagstaff, has an integrated clock face above the strip windows.

### Interior

An internal inspection, undertaken by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) in July 2015, reveals that much of the interior of the building remains intact. The former production areas to the rear (currently in use as a car showroom) are typical of industrial building of the period. They have concrete floors with steel columns that support an exposed steel-framed trussed sawtooth roof, with tall multi-paned clerestory windows and strapped cement sheet linings (Figure 10).



Figure 9: South end of the Salmon Street frontage of administration block, showing entry bay (source: photograph by National Trust of Australia (Victoria), July 2015)

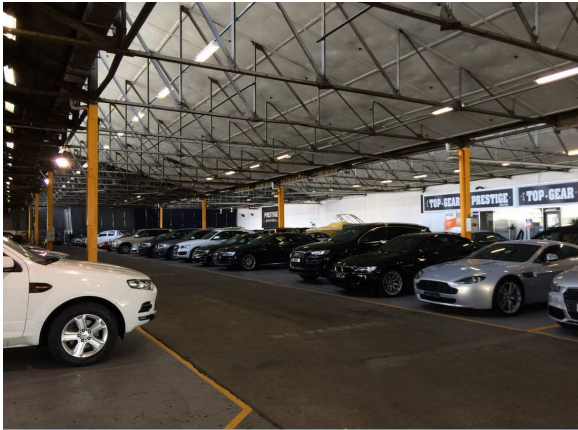


Figure 10: Interior of former production area



Figure 11: Interior of typical office space

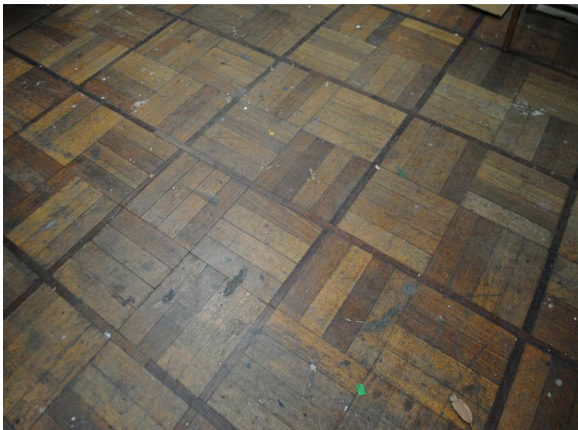


Figure 12: Detail of inlaid parquetry flooring

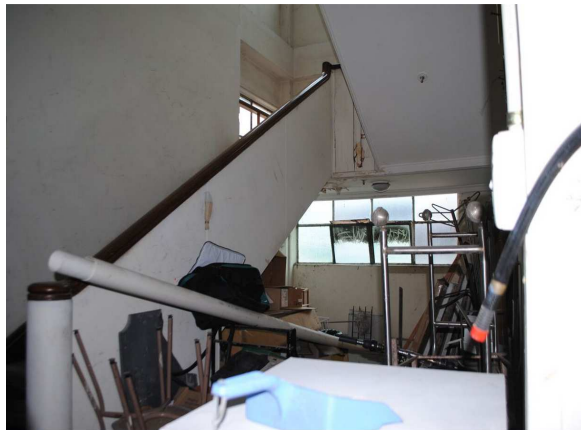


Figure 13: Staircase in administration wing

(source: all photographs by National Trust of Australia (Victoria), July 2015)

Similarly, much of the interior of the former administration wing appears to remain intact, albeit now in a somewhat neglected condition. Original fabric and finishes includes architraves, skirtings and door joinery in varnished timber (Figure 11), inlaid parquetry floors in a bordered basketweave pattern (Figure 12), plaster walls incorporating moulded panels, cornices and Art Deco-flavoured fluted piers, and original staircases with either metal railings or a solid balustrade with moulded timber handrail and cylindrical newels (Figure 13). Some examples of the original light switches, light fittings and door hardware also remain. All of this detailing is highly evocative of the late 1930s/early 1940s.

## D: ASSESSMENT

### COMPARISONS

The first three uses of the complex – initially by two different government departments and then by private enterprise – invite local comparisons on three different levels.

#### **Wartime Manufacture/Research in Port Melbourne**

During the Second World War, countless Melbourne manufacturers previously engaged in private enterprise turned their attention to contributing to the war effort, and the industrial heartland of Port Melbourne was no exception. The GMH factory, for example, manufactured vehicle bodies and engines for military use, as well as field guns. A few more specialised local industries such as Fireproof Tanks Ltd and Minerals (Victoria), which were already manufacturing products that were valuable to the war effort, were declared reserved occupations for the duration of the war; amongst other things, this exempted their staff from military service.

However, aside from the subject building, only other example has been identified of a factory in Port Melbourne that was purpose-built by a government department for specific wartime manufacture. In late 1941, the Department of Munitions selected a site on the west side of Bain Street for a factory to manufacture marine engines as part of a wartime shipbuilding programme. Completed in 1943 at a cost of £750,000, the factory initially employed about 1,000 people. It remained in operation well into the post-war period, but has since been demolished; even Bain Street itself no longer exists, having been absorbed into the Beacon Cove housing development.

As a site associated with the top secret wartime tank manufacturing programme, the subject building is unique in the City of Port Phillip, and apparently rare in a broader statewide context. A few other military sites in Victoria have associations with the tank programme, such as the Puckapunyal Camp near Seymour (where the AFV school was established in February 1941) or Fort Gellibrand at Williamstown (where a tank-related gunnery trial took place in 1942). However, the building in Salmon Street appears to be the only purpose-built structure in Victoria that was associated with the actual development and production of the tank itself. In this respect, its only true counterpart would be the tank assembly building that was erected at the NSW Railway Workshops in Chullora, where full-scale production of the AC1 (*Sentine*) tank commenced in 1942. This building still stands, and is currently included on the NSW State Heritage Register along with numerous other buildings (variously from the pre-war, wartime and post-war eras) on the former railway workshop site (refer NSW State Heritage Inventory database number 4801108).

## Aviation Industry in Port Melbourne

The building's occupation by the Department of Aircraft Production (Maintenance Division) relates to a significant theme in the City of Port Phillip: the emergence and early development of Australia's aviation industry. This dates back as far as 1919, when two businessmen laid out a makeshift landing strip in Port Melbourne, on wasteland south of the rifle range on Graham Street.<sup>23</sup> A year later, a more prepossessing aerodrome (with hangars) was established off Williamstown Road by H T Shaw and H G Ross, co-founders of the Shaw-Ross Engineering & Aviation Company (who, in 1928, shifted their enterprise to the new Essendon Airport). During the 1920s, several comparable businesses established premises in what is now the City of Port Phillip. These included the Larkin Aircraft Supply Company, which opened a factory in Meaden Street (1925) and the De Havilland Aircraft Company, which began assembling aircraft from a corrugated metal warehouse in Whiteman Street (1928). The former transferred to Coode Island in 1927, where it erected a larger and grander factory (complete with its own airstrip) while the latter relocated to Sydney in 1930.

The development of the aviation industry in Port Melbourne was bolstered after 1936, following the opening of a government aerodrome on a 140-acre site at Fishermen's Bend. This was promptly followed by the erection of a large factory on Lorimer Street, to the north of the aerodrome, for the newly-formed Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation (CAC). Despite its name, this was a private venture. Within only a few more years, however, the Commonwealth itself had established related activities in the same area, both also on Lorimer Street. In 1938, nineteen acres were acquired as a research laboratory for the newly-formed CSIR Division of Aeronautics. Two years later, an even larger site, adjacent to the existing CAC premises, was reserved for a new factory for the Beaufort Division of the Department of Aircraft Production. Both sites developed expanded steadily during the War, and remained in operation into the post-war period.

Little physical evidence exists of the aviation-related infrastructure established in Port Melbourne prior to 1945. No trace remains of the two airstrips created before 1920, while the premises occupied by Larkin Aircraft and De Havilland Aircraft, later that decade, have both long since disappeared. The government aerodrome at Fishermen's Bend, which ceased operation in 1957, has also vanished (the alignment of its north-south airstrip corresponds roughly with present-day Todd Road, and much of the remaining land was redeveloped in the 1980s as Westgate Park). The former CAC premises on Lorimer Street were taken over by Hawker de Havilland in 1986. By the early 2000s, all that remained of its pre-1945 infrastructure was a portion of sawtooth-roofed factory at the corner of Todd Road, and four hangars erected during the Second World War (apparently, since demolished).

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23 J L Keppert, 'Fishermen's Bend: A Centre of Australian Aviation', Unpublished 64pp typescript prepared by the DSTO Aeronautical Research Laboratory, September 1993, *passim*.

The former CAC site, and the adjacent site formerly occupied by the DAP (later known as the Government Aircraft Factory) have both undergone considerable redevelopment in more recent years. None of the pre-1945 buildings appears to remain standing at the former CAC site, which is now an industrial estate known as the Cititech Technology Park. The former DAP site, which has been occupied in more recent times by Aerospace Technologies/Boeing Australia, has also had a number of new buildings erected thereon. However, a desktop comparison of historic and current aerial photographs indicates that several large sawtooth-roofed and hip-roofed buildings still remain from the pre-1945 period, albeit some in a much altered or enlarged condition. The former CSIR Division of Aeronautics site, located further along Lorimer Street and still currently occupied by a descendant government department, also retains a number of pre-1945 buildings.

## **Car Manufacture in Port Melbourne**

As with aviation, Port Melbourne (and specifically Fisherman's Bend) has a significant association with the early development of Australia's automotive manufacture industry. This similarly dates back to the mid-1920s, when Neal's Motors Pty Ltd (one of the firms that pioneered the assembly of car chassis in Australia) established a workshop at Ingles Street, Port Melbourne. In 1938, the business relocated to a much larger five-acre assembly plant on a 20-acre site at the south-east corner of Lorimer and Salmon Streets, Fishermen's Bend. By that time, several rival firms had also commenced manufacture in that same area, including General Motors Holden on the other side of Salmon Street (1936) and Lane's Motors Pty Ltd in Plummer Street (1937). All three of these companies expanded their premises during the post-war period.

The establishment of local automotive factories by overseas companies, as demonstrated by Rootes Ltd in their takeover of the Salmon Street property in 1946, represents a notable sub-theme in the broader history of car manufacture in Australia. It was widely reported at the time that Rootes Ltd was the first British vehicle company to establish a manufacturing presence in Australia. Two others followed suit over the next few years; both, moreover, commenced production in Port Melbourne. They followed a similar pattern: rather than erecting their own manufacturing plant from scratch, each took over an existing business and then updated/expanded its premises accordingly. In 1952, the Standard Motor Company took over the Bertie Street property of Eclipse Motors Pty Ltd (a firm that had served as the British company's local agents since 1929) and developed it into a major vehicle manufacturing enterprise, later known as Australian Motor Industries and later still taken over by Toyota. In 1954, the Austin Motor Company (which entered the Australian market six years earlier, when it acquired the established local firm of Ruskin Motor Bodies Pty Ltd and began production from that firm's North Melbourne premises) relocated to Port Melbourne, taking over the Lorimer Street factory that had been established by Neal's Motors in the late 1930s.

Today, little remains of the once-vast factory complexes in Port Melbourne associated with the heyday of vehicle manufacture in the middle third of the twentieth century. The former Neal's Motors/Austin Motors plant at the corner of Lorimer and Salmon Street has entirely vanished, while only the 1936 front building remains from the GMH complex on the opposite side of Salmon Street (the extensive network of production buildings, to the rear, has been replaced by an industrial estate). Of the former Toyota site, the original pre-war factory (at the corner of Bertie and Rogers Street) was evidently obliterated by the construction of the West Gate Freeway, and the distinctive curve-roofed production buildings erected in the early 1950s have also gone. Today, all that evidently remains are some later sawtooth-roofed buildings.

## **ASSESSMENT AGAINST HERCON CRITERIA**

### **Criterion A. Importance to the course or pattern of our cultural history.**

*Constructed in 1941 as an experimental tank depot for the Department of Munitions, the original portion of the building retains significant historical associations with the Commonwealth government's manufacturing programme during the Second World War, and specifically with the top secret (if ultimately unsuccessful) scheme to develop and manufacture a locally-designed tank.*

*Occupied by the Department of Aircraft Production (Maintenance Division) from 1943 to 1946, the complex provides evidence of the aviation-related industry that once strongly characterised this part of Port Melbourne, forming a significant precinct that acknowledged as the centre for the Australian aviation industry from the 1930s to the 1960s. One of several such buildings located in the vicinity of the government aerodrome (established 1936 but no longer extant), the complex provides evidence of the former extent of this precinct, along with the remnants of the former Government Aircraft Factory and former CSIR Division of Aeronautics site, both in nearby Lorimer Street.*

*Occupied by British car manufacturer Rootes Ltd from 1946 (then, from 1966, absorbed by Chrysler Australia Ltd) until the plant ceased operation in 1972, the complex retains associations with the car manufacturing industry that also maintained a significant presence in Port Melbourne from the 1920s to the 1970s. More specifically, the site has important associations with the first British company to commence car production in Australia, ushering the way for others to follow in the later 1940s and 1950s (two of which, such as Austin and Standard-Triumph, were also based in Port Melbourne*

### **Criterion B. Possession of uncommon, rare or endangers aspects of our cultural history.**

*While many privately-operated factories in Port Melbourne contributed to the war effort during the Second World War, this building is rare as one of very few factory premises that were purpose-built by the Commonwealth specifically for wartime research or manufacture. Its nearest local counterpart, the Commonwealth Marine Engine Factory in Bain Street, Port Melbourne, has been demolished.*

*Specifically, the complex is rare as one of few buildings in Australia erected for the government's top secret wartime tank manufacture programme. While several places in Victoria retain associations with the tank programme (such as the Puckapunyal Camp, where the tank training school was established in 1942), this is the only building in Victoria that was purpose-built for a production-related aspect of the scheme. Its only comparator is the tank assembly building at the Chullora Railway Workshops in Sydney, which (along with other buildings at the site) is included in NSW State Heritage Register.*

**Criterion C. Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of our cultural history.**

N/A

**Criterion D. Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places or environments.**

N/A

**Criterion E. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.**

*The complex is significant as a representative and substantially intact example of the austere aesthetic style exhibited by Commonwealth buildings during the wartime period, combining simple utilitarian expression with sparing application of architectural embellishment. The latter is ably demonstrated by the corner wing of the front administration block that, with its symmetrical massing, vertical strip windows, banded corners, flagstaff and clock face, is typical of the Art Deco era of the late 1930s. Appropriately enough for a government building, this evokes a somewhat civic character akin to such contemporaneous buildings as the Heidelberg Town Hall (1937) and Brunswick Civic Hall (1938).*

**Criterion F. Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.**

N/A

**Criterion G. Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of the continuing and developing cultural traditions.**

N/A

**Criterion H. Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in our history.**

N/A

## DRAFT STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### What is significant?

The former Rootes Ltd factory at 19–25 Salmon Street, Port Melbourne, encapsulates the entire north half of the block bounded by Salmon, Plummer and Smith Streets. Its significant fabric comprises the original 1940s extent (ie, administration wing on Salmon Street and approximately the first 50 metres of the attached six-bay sawtooth-roofed production building) and the 1955 additions (ie, the rest of the sawtooth-roofed building extending to Smith Street and along Plummer Street, the two-storey rear block and the detached single-storey block now known as 20 Smith Street). The flat-roofed addition at the corner of Smith & Plummer Street, and the detached buildings on the opposite side of Smith Street (mostly erected after 1955) are not deemed to be significant.

### How is it significant?

The former Rootes Ltd factory satisfies the following HERCON criteria for inclusion on Heritage Overlay Schedule to the City of Port Phillip Planning Scheme:

Criterion A. Importance to the course or pattern of our cultural or natural history.

Criterion B. Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of our cultural history.

Criterion E. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.

### Why is it significant?

The former Rootes Ltd factory is significant at the local level for the following reasons:

For associations with the ambitious but ultimately short-lived unsuccessful top-secret government initiative to manufacture locally-designed military tanks as the gravity of the Second World War, and the perceived threat of Australian invasion, increased after 1940 (*Criterion A*). Conceived and built as an experimental workshop where full-scale timber mock-ups were fabricated during the prolonged design development phase, the building is unique in Victoria and rare in a national context as one of only two purpose-built facilities associated with wartime tank manufacture (*Criterion B*).

For associations with the Department of Aircraft Production (Maintenance Division), which occupied the building from 1943 to 1946 as an adjunct to the factory erected in nearby Lorimer Street by the department's other branch, the Beaufort Division, for the wartime manufacture of Beaufort bomber aircraft. These sites, together with the laboratories of the CSIR Division of Aeronautics and the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation factory (both also in Lorimer Street), several smaller premises engaged in related industry, and the government aerodrome itself, combined to form a significant precinct that was acknowledged as the entre of the Australian aviation industry from the 1930s to the 1970s (*Criterion A*).



For associations with leading British car manufacturers Rootes Ltd, which occupied the building from 1946 until 1966 (and thence, after merging with Chrysler Australia Ltd, until 1972). The company, well known for its popular Hillman, Humber and Sunbeam cars, was the first British car manufacturer to establish a factory in Australia and paved the way for others including Standard-Triumph and Austin Motors, both of which also established factories in Port Melbourne (respectively, in 1952 and 1954). The long occupation of the building by Rootes Ltd, during which several phases of addition were made (notably in 1955 and 1962), is associated with the broader theme of automotive manufacture in Port Melbourne, which maintained a significant presence in the area from the 1930s to the 1980s (*Criterion A*).

As a representative and substantially intact example of Commonwealth government architecture during the austere wartime period, characterised by a generally utilitarian expression of simple materials and finishes, with only nominal attempt at architectural pretension. In this case, the south corner of the administration block was imparted with a degree of civic grandeur with two rendered and symmetrical facades that incorporate elements typical of the Art Deco style of the late 1930s, notably the bays of vertical strip windows with fin-like piers, banded corners, flagstaff and integrated clock face (*Criterion E*).

## PROPOSED EXTENT OF HERITAGE OVERLAY

It is proposed that the heritage overlay extend across the entire block bounded by Salmon, Plummer and Smith Streets (Figure 14). This will then include all of the original 1940s building, the additions to the north and west that were made in 1955 (including the detached rear block now known as 20 Smith Street) and the later flat-roofed addition to the north-west corner (now 30 Smith Street). The extent of the HO should extend all the way to the Salmon Street boundary of the site, providing sufficient curtilage to preserve public views of the principal façade.

If it is necessary to define a nominal hierarchy of significance within the proposed HO, research undertaken to date would suggest that the original 1940s fabric (comprising the front administration block and the first approximately 50 metres of the six-bay production building) would be considered of **primary** significance, the 1955 additions of **contributory** significance, and the later corner addition of **little or no** significance.



Figure 14: Proposed extent of Heritage Overlay