

*Heritage* is now big business in Australia but many people interested in preserving historic buildings or in understanding the history of their own towns and suburbs are baffled by the technical language and complex legal machinery of the heritage professionals.

A **Heritage Handbook** is the first concise, comprehensive guide to heritage issues in Australia. In straightforward language it explains how the idea of 'heritage' developed and outlines the recent history of the Australian heritage movement. It provides a comprehensive review of heritage legislation in each State and the Commonwealth, and shows through a series of case studies, how some major heritage issues have been contested and resolved.

A **Heritage Handbook** emphasises the practicalities of heritage work by answering questions on:

- researching the history of one's own house
- interpreting a historic site
- what makes a building historic
- how to present a case to a local council or planning authority

The most commonly used heritage terminology is discussed, and each chapter has suggestions for further reading. A **Heritage Handbook** is the ideal companion for any citizen concerned about the history of Australia's built environment.

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A HERITAGE HANDBOOK

EDITED BY GRAEME DAVISON  
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# HERITAGE

H A N D B O O K



EDITED BY

*Graeme Davison and Chris McConville*

## 6

### What makes a building historic?

**I**N 1873 the globe-trotting English novelist Anthony Trollope made a visit to Australia's abandoned convict settlement of Port Arthur. For the people of Van Diemen's land the ending of the convict era had not come a moment too soon, and they were as anxious to obliterate this place of pain and purgatory from their memories as they were to exchange the old unhappy name of Van Diemen's Land for the fresh, proud name of Tasmania. What would become of this sad collection of gaols, stores, chapels and barracks the visiting novelist wondered. 'They will fall into the dust, and men will make unfrequent excursions to the strange ruins', he predicted.

For almost 50 years, Trollope's expectations were fulfilled. The government sold off some of the buildings for removal, the land was subdivided and sold at auction, and what remained of the settlement was re-named 'Carnarvon'. Over the years, bushfires razed several of the buildings and others were overgrown with bushes and weeds. Not until the 1920s did a few adventurous motorists and bushwalkers begin to rediscover the place. By then, the ruins had acquired a more romantic appearance. 'Like the ruinous tombstones of a neglected old graveyard', one guide book remarked, they created 'a longing desire in the minds of the curious to know something of its wonderful history'. In the wake of these first explorers came the inevitable souvenir hunters and grave-robbers, searching for old leg-irons, convict-made bricks and other relics of the colony's founding years. But it was not until 1949 that the Tasmanian government at last moved to reacquire the site and place it under the control of its Scenery Preservation Board. Now, at the cost of several millions of Commonwealth taxpayers' dollars, Port Arthur has been carefully restored and the strange ruins are the site of increasingly frequent excursions by busloads of tourists from all over the world.

Port Arthur is, by any standard, one of Australia's most important

historical sites, and the story of its death and resurrection illustrates, not only the growth of preservationist sentiment in the twentieth century, but our changing views of what makes a building or a place 'historic'. Like the word 'heritage', the concept of the 'historic' has gradually become a keyword in the vocabulary of conservation-minded Australians. What does it mean?

In the course of the past twenty years or so, architectural historians have developed clear and widely-accepted criteria for determining the *architectural* importance of a building. Is it the work of an eminent architect? Does it embody an innovative or skilful design solution? Is it an outstanding or typical example of an important style? Does it exhibit an important use of new materials or building technology? The underlying assumptions of the architectural historian's approach are similar to those of an art historian or literary critic. The individual building is placed, like a picture or a poem, within a taxonomic framework of authorship, style, period and so on, and then ranked according to its relative importance. Connoisseurs will sometimes differ in their ranking of individual buildings, but everyone accepts the assumption that such a ranking is, or ought to be, possible. But no such consensus has yet developed for the critical assessment of historic significance.

For most purposes, the words 'historic' and 'historical' are interchangeable. 'Of or relating to history; historical as opposed to fiction or legend: relating to historical events'. These are the standard dictionary meanings of both words. But the word 'historic' also has a narrower meaning when it is defined as related to 'an *important* part or item of history; *noted* or *celebrated* in history'. As the example of Port Arthur reminds us, ideas of what are 'important', 'noted' or 'celebrated' may change with the times and vary between one observer and another. 'Historic', the word enshrined in the Victorian Historic Buildings Act (1974), has often been avoided in favour of the more neutral and internationally recognised, but equally vague, idea of 'cultural significance'.

When architects appraise buildings, it was suggested, they implicitly adopt the standpoint of a connoisseur, grading buildings according to a scale of relative excellence. But when historians say a building is historically important they are not giving it a rank amidst a range of other possible candidates, but making a judgement of its significance in relation to a wider context of social, political or intellectual history. The architect's method of assessment is primarily intrinsic and comparative, relating to the specific qualities of the building or structure itself; the historian's is primarily contextual, relating to the society of which the building is a physical relic. When architects wish to argue for the significance of a building they are inclined to locate it in a taxonomy of styles—Georgian, Victorian, Federation etc. When his-

torians argue for its significance they are inclined to tell its human story or to locate it in its past social and geographical context.

### THE BUILDING AS AN ANTIQUE

In layman's language, however, 'historic' often means nothing more than 'old'. When local residents band together to save an old building they usually dignify it with the word 'historic'. During a typical week in 1986 the Yarram *News* highlighted the sale of the 'historic property', 'Woodlands', the *Dandenong Journal* reported the local council's discussions with the Commonwealth government to try and save the 'historic Berwick Post Office', the *Emerald Hill Times* voiced its concern about the deterioration of the 'historic' Kerferd Road pier and the *Essendon Gazette* featured a competition sponsored by the Urban Conservation Advisory Committee for the restoration of the district's 'historic homes'. A building, according to this ordinarily accepted usage, becomes 'historic' if it is old enough, and in danger of demolition or decay. Just as serious illness reminds us of our mortality, so decrepitude and threatened demolition may heighten our sense of a building's historic significance.

People are attracted to old buildings for much the same combination of sentimental, aesthetic and solidly commercial reasons as they are attracted to old furniture, old books, old porcelain and other antiques. Old houses, real estate advertisements keep telling us, are full of 'old world charm' and 'the romance of yesteryear'. In a stark world of glass and concrete efficiency, they evoke an age somehow gentler and more harmonious than our own. Happily they can also be good business, for as good examples become scarcer, their monetary value also increases.

Reverence for age was one of the prime forces behind the development of the preservationist movement. The English architectural critic, John Ruskin, who strongly influenced the founders of the British National Trust, saw the buildings of the late middle ages as a source of inspiration to a generation living amidst the dark satanic mills of the industrial revolution. 'The greatest glory of a building', Ruskin believed,

... is in its Age, and in that deeper sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long since been washed by the passing waves of humanity. It is in their lasting witness against men, in their quiet contrast with the transitional character of all things, in the strength which, through the lapse of seasons and times, and the decline and birth of dynasties, and the changing face of the earth, and of the limits of the sea, maintains its sculptural shapeliness for a time insuperable, connects forgotten and following ages with each other, and half constitutes the identity, as it concentrates the sympathy, of nations: it is in that golden stain of time, that



This 1850s corner shop, a rare relic of Melbourne's earliest phase of development, earned a place on the State's Historic Buildings Register, largely for its relative antiquity in a part of the city now dominated by high-rise office buildings. (Photograph: VGPO)

we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture . . .

Ruskin's was a romantic approach to architecture. Modern-day historians may be inclined to dismiss his belief in the importance of age as more antiquarian than historical. Merely to be old, they would say, cannot make a building historically significant, even if it may exert a certain antique charm. Besides, in Australia at least, there simply are no truly ancient buildings.

Yet there are also dangers in drawing too sharp a line between antiquarianism and historical significance. In a recently-settled country like Australia, we need to keep a sufficient number of buildings and objects that remind us of our origins. The antiquarian's love of old things can often lead to questions of a more truly historical kind. As we suggest in chapter 8, some buildings and sites—Sydney's First Government House, La Trobe's Cottage, Fremantle's Arthur's Head—are important to us as a physical link with the earliest moments of European settlement.

The trouble with the antiquarian approach is that it may blind us to the historical importance of much younger buildings. The British National Trust was born of the movement to preserve ancient monuments such as medieval churches and castles. It was not until the First

World War that it began to take an interest in Palladian architecture and not until after the Second World War that it turned its attention to the great industrial buildings of the nineteenth century. Early students of Sydney's architecture, such as Morton Hermon, concentrated almost exclusively on Georgian buildings. When Maie Casey and her colleagues made their first photographic survey of Melbourne's built heritage, *Early Melbourne Architecture* (1953), they concentrated on the few surviving examples of pre-1850 buildings and concluded their survey in 1888. Only in very recent years, have architectural and social historians begun to pay due respect to Australia's twentieth-century buildings. The trouble with them, as Peter Spearritt reminds us, is that they are 'too common for their own good. If they were fewer in number', he believes, 'historians and architects would take them more seriously'. Of the 600 or so buildings on the Victorian Historic Buildings Register no more than 50 were constructed since 1900 and most of these have been added more with a view to their architectural than to their historic importance.

### THE BUILDING AS A SHRINE

What makes a building historic, some people would argue, is not so much its age as its association with famous events or people. In his *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Ruskin went so far as to claim that it was 'not until a building has been entrusted with the fame, and hallowed by the deeds of men, until its walls have been witnesses of suffering, and its pillars rise out of the shadows of death' that it gained an aura of the historic.

It was some such idea which inspired the Melbourne businessman Russell Grimwade in the early 1930s to buy and transplant the alleged Captain Cook's Cottage from its original location in Great Ayrtton in Yorkshire to Melbourne's Fitzroy Gardens. Grimwade believed that, by viewing this relic of the great navigator, Victorians might somehow be brought more closely in touch with the spirit of the man himself.

We are certain [wrote Hermon Gill in a 1934 guide to the cottage] that something of Cook lives and lingers in the walls of the cottage today. Even if it were not his boyhood home, it is something more. It knew the great navigator as Australia knew him. Its doorstep rang to his heel as he entered. Its walls heard his voice, and the voice of his parent. Within them must be stored memories of the sacred bonds which tie loving father and devoted son . . .

Modern Australian historians have generally been sceptical of the power of shrines and relics to establish communion with the mighty dead. Manning Clark, the last of the romantic historians, is almost alone among his professional colleagues in approaching the places associated with the events he writes about in the spirit of pilgrimage.



In 1989 the citizens of Bordertown, SA, placed a plaque on the childhood home of Prime Minister, Bob Hawke. (Photograph: *The Age*)

Australians are not a people much given to hero-worship and, compared with Britons or Americans, we have very few shrines to our great men and women. In 1887, as Australia approached its centenary, the Premier of New South Wales, Sir Henry Parkes, proposed that the government should erect a great State House containing, amongst other things, a mausoleum for the nation's heroes. It is indicative of our democratic outlook, perhaps, that Parkes' scheme was laughed out of the legislature. Few of our prime ministers have memorials like the Lincoln memorial, the Washington monument or the Kennedy memorial and their birthplaces and homes are not hallowed like those of Disraeli, Gladstone and Churchill. The only prime minister's home which has become a museum is Ben Chifley's—a simple wood railwayman's cottage on the wrong side of the tracks in his home town of Bathurst. No one has suggested that we consecrate the Jeparit birthplace of Sir Robert Menzies or Stanley Melbourne Bruce's mansion at Mt Eliza. Even Alfred Deakin's birthplace in Fitzroy failed to gain entry into the Historic Buildings Register when it was nominated several years ago.

In the property pages of the metropolitan dailies associations, even very tenuous associations with a great man or woman are sometimes invoked as a selling point. Under the heading 'Link with a famous artist', an otherwise nondescript Toorak house was recently advertised as the home of a 'family friend' of Sir Arthur Streeton, while a pleasant villa in Moonee Ponds was said to have been visited on one occasion by Sir Robert Menzies. But if the prospective purchaser feels

a warm glow as he crosses the threshold in the steps of Sir Robert Menzies, it is unlikely that he seriously regards his new home as 'historic'.

Even when the association between the building and the great man is more enduring, it may still be quite uninteresting. As Sir John Summerson, the British architectural historian, once remarked, 'the objective fact that a certain man did live in a certain house is of purely subjective value'. The connection becomes more than sentimental only if the historic personage and the building somehow help to interpret each other. Ben Chifley's humble house is perhaps a fitting memorial for the locomotive engine driver who became a prime minister.

An otherwise unprepossessing building sometimes acquires historic significance, not just for its association with a famous person or event, but as the historical basis of a famous fiction. The lakeside house at Chiltern once occupied by the young Henry Handel Richardson takes on additional significance from the use which the novelist subsequently made of it in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Early in 1988 literary historians and local conservationists formed a protest committee to oppose projected extensions to Wyework, an unprepossessing Californian bungalow at Thirroul on the New South Wales South Coast. For eight weeks in 1922 Wyework had been the home of the English novelist, D. H. Lawrence, and his German-born wife Frieda. It was here that Lawrence wrote all but the last chapter of his novel, *Kangaroo*. Something, not only of events and daily life in Thirroul, but of the physical and emotional climate of the house itself are to be detected in the novel. The proposed extensions to the house, one literary historian argued, would not only change the character of the house but rob it of 'the feeling of the emotional to and fro between the Lawrences'.

### THE BUILDING AS A DOCUMENT

What really makes the house of a great man or woman historically important is what makes *any* building historically important—namely, that it throws light on a significant aspect of the lives of people in the past. It is not just as an *antique*, nor as a *shrine*, but as a *document*, as a piece of vital evidence about the past society that created it, that a building deserves to be regarded as 'historic'.

Some important consequences flow from an understanding of buildings as documents. Correctly interpreting a document requires that we know and understand the language and idiom in which it is expressed. Similarly, the attentive social historian must take pains to understand the techniques, materials and architectural vocabulary of those who constructed the building as well as the codes of behaviour and way of life of those who occupied or used it. Only if they could place

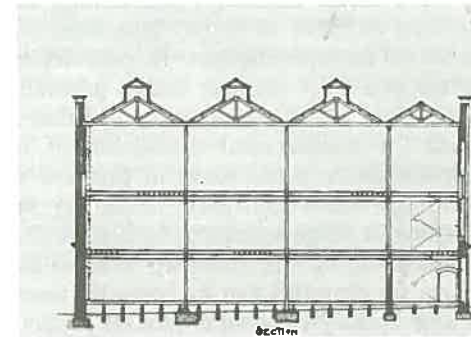
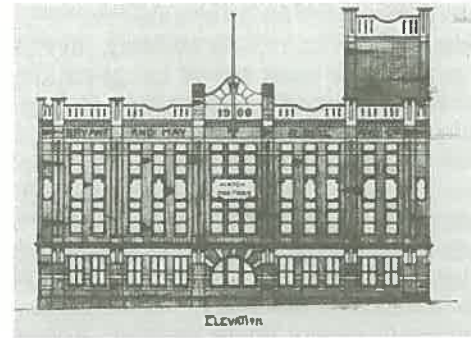


*This Second World War air-raid shelter in St Kilda, Victoria, was recently placed on the Victorian Historic Buildings Register. It is an innovative, and durable, example of concrete construction as well as a vivid reminder of a moment, unique in our European history, when Australia was threatened by foreign invasion.*  
(Photograph: VGPO)



themselves in the position of those to whom a building was addressed, understanding every symbol and association called upon by its builder, could historians correctly interpret a building, argued Ruskin. But buildings are capable of revealing our ancestors, not only through their conscious symbolism, but through their unstated social assumptions. Ruskin believed that only the grandeur of past ages should be preserved. While castles and great houses were worthy of respect, mere villas and recreational buildings were not. 'We wish succeeding generations to admire our energy, but not ever to be aware of our lassitude; to know when we moved, but not when we rested, how we ruled, not how we condescended . . .' But posterity has to decide for itself what it wishes to remember of past ages, and a more democratic and self-questioning society than Ruskin's may regard the nineteenth-century villa, and even the factory and cottage, with more interest than he did. It may wish to be conducted through the stables and servants' quarters as well as the grand ballrooms and drawing rooms.

Since the 1970s Australian heritage bodies, in common with similar bodies around the world, have gradually broadened and refined their



*Bryant and May Match Factory.* (Photograph: VGPO)

criteria of historical significance. A recent reviewer of heritage studies in the United States, for example, remarked on a broadening of criteria to include structures which are 'recent, vernacular and associated with ordinary lives and events'. The Victorian Historic Buildings Council suggests that a building may be suitable for inclusion on its Register if it is found to 'represent, or be an extraordinary example of, a way of life, custom, process or function'. In recent years it has registered a number of buildings of primarily social-historical significance such as the Victoria Brewery, the Bryant and May Match Factory, a Second World War air-raid shelter, a nineteenth-century rural flour mill, complete with intact machinery and fittings, and a local newspaper office and printery.

The necessarily broad criteria required to encompass items of social historical significance have sometimes been criticised by architectural purists as providing no firm basis for judgements of relative importance. Surely, they argue, any item that is not 'extraordinary' will be considered 'representative' and therefore any item at all—even the most mundane cream brick veneer—will become a potential candidate for registration. Claims based on 'representativeness' are implicitly comparative and therefore throw an obligation upon the historian

making them to carry out a systematic search for comparable examples. They are not, however, claims for 'typicality'—a building may be 'extraordinary' in its capacity to illustrate some way of life or custom, while being quite atypical of the class of buildings to which it belongs. Judgements of social-historical significance may be subject, therefore, to similar kinds of comparative analysis to that usually undertaken by architectural historians. But since it is the 'ways of life' or 'customs', rather than the buildings themselves, which are the primary object of the historian's attention, such comparative analysis is intrinsically more difficult than the stylistic categorisation of an architectural historian.

It is a principle of historical interpretation that a building acquires significance only in relation to its context. Similarly, establishing the historical significance of a building requires us to pay attention, not only to its intrinsic qualities, but to its surroundings. In considering architectural significance, lawyers and most heritage bodies generally insist that each building is considered on its own merits, and that it cannot derive importance from the architectural distinction of its neighbours, although planning legislation often seeks to preserve at least the external fabric of buildings which contribute to the general ambience or stylistic unity of a street or neighbourhood. In considering historical importance, however, a building's relationship with its environs may be quite crucial. How, for example, can we correctly assess the importance of Melbourne's or Sydney's Customs Houses without reference to the busy wharves, chandleries, warehouses and shipping offices which once surrounded them? How can a country flour mill be understood except by reference to the local patterns of grain production, transport and consumption that once supported it? What significance does a cable tram engine house have apart from the lines of cable which once powered the silently moving tram cars? It may require a good deal of skilful research and historical imagination to discover the forgotten links between some old buildings and their spatial context but it is the only way in which the modern observer can truly enter into the social world of which they were once a part.

Historical documents are products, not only of their originators, but of successive processes of editing, revision, translation and interpretation. When historians read a document they see it as potential evidence, not only about its originators, but about all those who have participated in the processes through which it was handed down to the present. Viewing buildings as documents, therefore, alerts us to their significance, not only as evidence about the builder, architect and original owner, but also to the processes of cultural and social change which have subsequently altered, extended, truncated or refurbished them. We may liken some old buildings to palimpsests—parchments which have been successively written upon, crossed out, erased and

written over by different hands so as to leave several distinct 'layers' of writing. Reading such a manuscript calls for high skills in paleography (the study of obsolete scripts), contemporary idiom, and knowledge of the various periods in which the document was composed. So, too, the social historian interpreting the fabric of an inner suburban terrace house which has been successively occupied by a late nineteenth-century merchant, an early twentieth-century boardinghouse keeper, an Italian immigrant family and a trendy professional couple would need a good eye, not only for contemporary decorating styles, but for the *mores* of the occupiers.

It was once the fashion, among conservationists, to seek to 'restore' such a building to its 'original' condition, treating the intervening layers of occupation as distortions of the historical significance of the building. Conservation architects sometimes recommended the destruction of the Victorian additions to a Georgian cottage in order to restore it to its 'original condition'. Yet, such a conscientious attempt to recover the original feeling of the building can sometimes diminish its significance as an historical document. It is not just that the brightly restored paintwork obliterates the patina of age; it is also that the removal of those seemingly 'intrusive' or 'unsympathetic' additions deprives the viewer of a sense of the precarious passage by which the building has made its way down to the present day.

Graeme Davison

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## 7

## Romantic ruins

SOME historic places have special significance to all Australians. We know where they are, and we know something about them, even if we have never been to see them.

Every capital city has a precinct of old buildings which are the remains of the early settlers' houses, such as Battery Point in Hobart, The Rocks in Sydney, Arthurs Head in Fremantle, and Myilly Point in Darwin. These are regarded with interest and affection by the local people, but it is those places which remain remote from the cities, buried in the forests or stranded along the coasts, which fully evoke the mystery and romance of past times.

Such abandoned sites are Australia's romantic ruins, the equivalent of Britain's Tintern Abbey or Stonehenge. The oldest surviving house, Parramatta's Elizabeth Farm, had already acquired this aura by 1840, just 50 years after settlement, when it was recognised as one of the colony's historic buildings. The presence of old sites has a powerful effect. It legitimises a society's occupation of the land and it gives it historical depth. Surely a people must have a valid claim to ownership of a land punctuated with sites marking their conquest?

These are the 'sacred sites' of white Australia's history, sites which most Australians would be concerned about if their integrity and survival were threatened. But this has not always been so. The significance of these sites has changed through time. All have been through a cycle of primary use, disfavour and neglect, alternative uses, reassessment as important cultural places, and conservation and management as historic sites. Four such sites will be discussed in this chapter: the First Government House site in the centre of Sydney, Elizabeth Farm at Parramatta, Port Arthur Historic Site on the Tasman Peninsula south of Hobart, and the former prison on St Helena Island in Moreton Bay.

All of these sites are associated with significant events in Australia's