



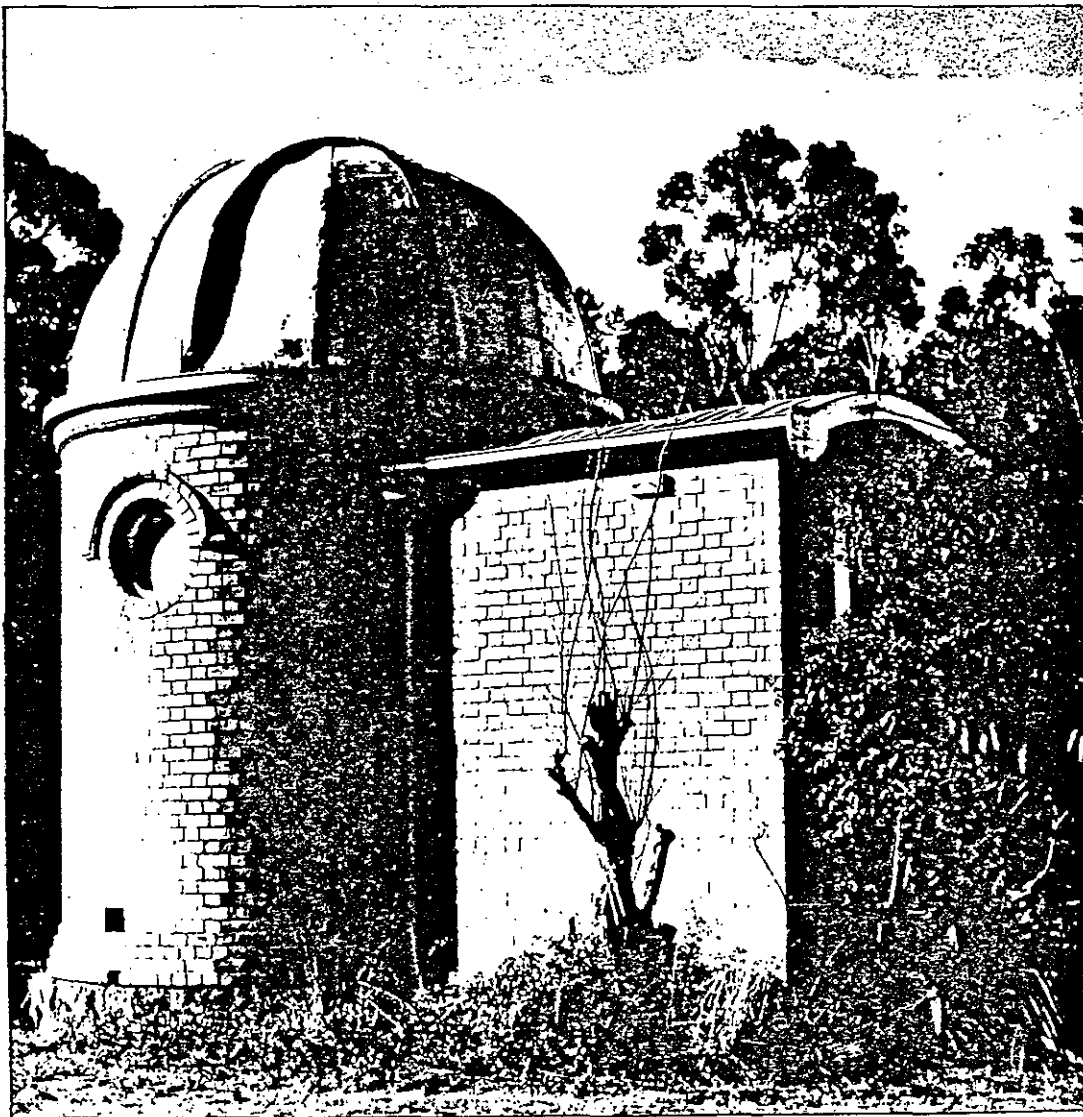
BALLARAT OBSERVATORY

Magpie Street

erected 1918 (Jelbart Observatory); 1922 (Equatorial Telescope Building);
1923 (Wooden Runaway Shed)

engineer: F.H.Finch (1922,1923)

contractors: Bulldog Engineering Co. and W.F.Osborne (steel and ironwork), 1922



RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Ballarat Observatory complex be added to the Historic Buildings Register, the Register of the National Estate and be specified using the provisions of Clauses 8 and 8B of the *Town and Country Planning Act 1961* (Third Schedule).

BUILDING HISTORY AND ANALYSIS

The Ballarat Municipal Observatory, formerly known as the "School of Mines Observatory" and the "Oddie Observatory", owes its existence to Mr. James Oddie, who was a leading Ballarat citizen, a wealthy mine owner and a sometime member of the Ballarat City Council. Mr. Oddie was also interested in astronomy and, on his instigation, a Mr. J. Wall was asked in 1884 to survey land in the White Horse Ranges with the aim of locating a possible Observatory site. Three acres of timbered land at what is now known as Mt. Pleasant were chosen, and in 1885 the State Government reserved the selected site for Observatory purposes (a reservation which is still in force.) A committee of 7 (one of whom was Mr. Oddie) was appointed and charged with the care, protection and management of the reserve.

The work of clearing the site and erecting the necessary buildings was financed by Mr. Oddie, who, late in 1885, donated the buildings etc. to the Ballarat School of Mines (of whose Council he was vice-President). The 'astronomical' work was entrusted to one Capt. Henry Evans Baker, an ex-merchant sea captain whom Oddie had met working in a mining venture at Goldsbrough. Mr. Oddie induced Capt. Baker to come to Ballarat, and to take up residence on the Observatory site in a cottage which Oddie had moved up from Sebastopol. Capt. Baker appears to have been a most remarkable man, and the "success" of the Observatory was due in large measure to his talents.

Little is known about Baker's astronomical background, but he was awarded a Silver Medal at the Melbourne Exhibition of 1873 for a telescope of his own construction (a 12½ inch Newtonian). This telescope was the first one to be used in the Observatory, coming into official use on 13 January 1886. The formal opening of the Observatory took place on 11 May 1886, on which occasion an address was read to Mr. Oddie on behalf of the students of the Astronomical class at the School of Mines. The address concluded with the hope that he would permit this "light of the sky" to be named the "Oddie Observatory".

The main telescope at the Observatory is Baker's 25 inch "Great Equatorial Telescope", which was formally commissioned on 10 December 1888. This massive instrument (now known as "The Baker") was constructed at the Observatory in the workshops there using equipment which Baker had built. The 26 inch mirror blanks (of which there were 2) were purchased by Oddie for £1000 in England whilst he was on one of his several trips there.

During 1887, Capt. Baker constructed another telescope using an 8 inch speculum mirror in a 7 foot tube. The similarity between the mounting of this telescope and the larger "Baker" is obvious. This telescope, which was later fitted with a glass mirror, is also still at the Observatory and is today known as the "Oddie" telescope. These are the only 2 of the original telescopes remaining at the Observatory, but the whereabouts of at least 2 other Baker constructions are known. Capt. Baker died in 1890 without having even uncrated the 9 inch refractor which Oddie had purchased complete in England during his 1887 trip. In the 1920's, this instrument was donated to Mt. Stromlo on its formation, and is still installed and used there as the "Oddie Telescope".

After 1890, Capt. Baker's widow and his grand-daughter (Miss Effie Baker) continued to live in the cottage in the grounds and to supply the official meteorological data for Ballarat (a function which, incidentally was continued at the Observatory until the death of Mr. Caird in the mid 1950's). The Observatory itself, however, suffered greatly at this time because of the lack of "professional" care, and was in danger of being closed forever. In 1903, the School of Mines asked the City Council to relieve it of its responsibility for the Observatory, but the Council refused to accept the responsibility for another 12 years.

In 1915, at the instigation of Mr. John Brittain, the Ballarat East City Council took over the Observatory and installed him as resident curator. Mr. Brittain, who had been health inspector for the Council and was a Lay-Reader in the Methodist Church, carried out much fine work at the Observatory. He was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, and received honours from the Astronomical Society, received honours from the Astronomical Society of France and the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. He was also responsible for the installation of the fine leadlight windows at the Observatory, and the formation of the library.

In 1918, Mr. Jelbart senior presented to the Observatory a 5 inch refracting telescope (made by Steward, London) which he had purchased in Adelaide (for £250) a few years before for his own use. This instrument equipped with setting circles and a weight-driven clock-drive, is mounted in a domed building which was built by voluntary labour.

After the death of Mr. Brittain, Mr. Alexander Caird was appointed curator, a post he held with distinction until his death in the 1950's. (Mr. Caird's widow lived on in the cottage at the Observatory until her passing in 1970, at which time the cottage was demolished). Following Mr. Caird's death, the Observatory once again fell into disuse, and, hearing of this, members of the Astronomical Society of Victoria came to Ballarat and revived interest in the historical value of the Observatory. Following their visit, the late Councillor W.E. Roff convened a public meeting in 1958 which resulted in the formation of the Ballarat Astronomical Society early the following year. Since then, this Society has worked under a mandate from the Ballarat City Council by which they are responsible for the preservation, maintenance and use of the historic Observatory.¹

There are three main buildings which make up the Observatory complex. The Jelbart Observatory was constructed in 1918 to house the telescope donated by Mr. Jelbart Senior. Bricks for the building were donated, voluntary labour utilised for construction, and the stained glass windows were donated by Melbourne firm of Brooks, Robinson & Co. Ltd. The building has a circular plan with a rectangular porch on the south. The porch has a slightly arched corrugated iron roof, while the circular room (housing the telescope) has a domed roof which is able to open and rotate in conjunction with the operation of the telescope.

The adjacent Oddie Building contains the 8 inch telescope constructed by Capt. Baker in 1887. The building is weatherboard with a low pitched roof. At the south a large window dominates the building. It contains a superb stained glass panel with planets in the upper section and a Kookaburra and Magpie perching on a gum tree with the sun rising in the background.

The window, presented by the proprietors of the *Ballarat Courier* in 1914, is a splendid and fitting decoration, and one of great importance to the complex. Internally the Oddie building has a pressed metal ceiling.

The third major building, Baker Hall, is an enlarged version of the Oddie building. Again stained glass windows are a major feature of the interior and all eight windows were donated by local organisations and business houses.² The roof of Baker Hall is of major importance. The front section has a low pitched gable while the rear section is of arched corrugated iron set on a frame which slides back enabling the 26 inch Baker telescope to be used.³ To support the roof in the open position, a metal frame is located at the rear of the building.

The grounds of the Observatory are of interest. Remnants of planting from the now demolished caretaker's cottage still survive, and the higher position gives a good view over much of Ballarat. A row of mature pines along the rear boundary enhances the site, and the whole complex, both architecturally and historically is unique in Victoria.⁴

1. "History [of Ballarat Observatory]", *The Oddie Baker Bulletin*, official Journal of Ballarat Astronomical Society, Vol. 5, No. 5, May 1980.
2. Titheridge and Growcott, Methodist Church, Ballarat City Council (1916), Sebastopol Cambrian Society, Welsh Residents of Ballarat, Masonic Lodge, and Independent Order of Oddfellows.
3. "Moving Roof for Equatorial Telescope. Municipal Observatory Mt.Pleasant", drawing held by Ballarat City Council, Plan and Sections, scale $\frac{1}{2}$ inch = 1 foot, contract No.15, 1922, F.H. Finch City Engineer 13/7/22. Building Engineering Company Contractor for Steel and Ironwork, W.F.Osborne 14/8/22. Louis H.Vernon witness 14/8/22. Ballarat City Council also hold a number of other later miscellaneous plans of the Observatory.
4. General notes on the history are also contained in S.J.Czyuski, *Souvenir of the Ballarat Observatory*, n.d.

(Right) Leaded glass window in the Oddie Building, 1914

(Lower) Ballarat Observatory, c.1919.
(Illustration from *Ballarat Illustrated*, C.1919, facsimile edition 1972)

