



**Edward Willis house  
242 Ryrie Street**

**History**

Pastoralist, Edward Willis purchased this Crown Allotment for £150, together with CA7/22, in 1847.<sup>1</sup> Tenders were called in 1847 by the architect, John Gill, to construct a store and residence<sup>2</sup>. Soon after, Willis's store was described in Yarra Street, opposite the Union Bank of Australia (1847). Willis occupied what was described, in the first rate book of 1850, as a stone six-room house with stables and cellar, during 1850-3.<sup>3</sup> He also owned a store near the Ryrie Street corner which backed onto this house and was rated in the same entry. Willis owned no other property in Yarra Street in 1850, confirming that the store and residence of 1847 were the same as rated for this and the adjacent Yarra Street site. His former house at the corner of Moorabool Street and Barwon

Terrace (demolished) was acquired by John McWhirter in 1850<sup>4</sup>, indicating that Willis had built this house by early 1850. The architect Gill, also designed Mack's Hotel (demolished) of 1846 and supervised the erection of Christ Church<sup>5</sup>

Willis then sold both lots to William Montgomery Bell, for £520, who subdivided and resold them in the period 1851-3. Bell sold this site in late 1853 to Eustace James Walshe for an impressive £3000, confirming that the lot was already substantially improved.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Walshe moved into what was described in the *Geelong Advertiser* as 'E. Willis's late house'<sup>7</sup> in March 1853, confirming that it was Willis who had improved the property not Bell and that he had occupied it for sufficient time for it to have become identified with him in the community. Walshe continued to practise at this address until his removal to Yarra Street in 1859.<sup>8</sup> During this period, the

1 RGO 61061  
2 *Port Phillip Herald* 23.3.47 cited by Huddle thesis Vol3, p.92 from Melbourne University architects index  
3 RB 1850, 59; RB 1851, 264; RB 1853, 425  
4 Ian Wynd GA personal index  
5 Huddle Vol.1, p.7  
6 RGO 61061  
7 *Morrow index*, GHRC  
8 loc. cit. *Geelong Advertiser* 24.1.1859

City of Geelong Urban Conservation Study  
Significant Sites

house is noted as possessing a verandah, a stable and loft also a gig-house.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the architect Edward Prowse moved his office to the house in February 1859 when it was noted by the Geelong valuer as being 'in bad order'.<sup>2</sup> It seems likely that Prowse may have designed the building, having also been involved in Cpt. Montague's Frogmore (1840c), Noble's Melaleuca (1854) and the Armytage family's The Hermitage<sup>3</sup>.

Eustace Walshe Jnr. was the next long-term occupier, followed by the family's tenants who included Margaret Wilson, Stella Fuller and George Kingsland Harris, a medical specialist.<sup>4</sup>

Edward Willis was born at Hornsby, Cumberland, in 1816, first living with his parents in Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania). With his brothers, he took pure-bred merino sheep to Port Phillip in 1837 and established his run at the junction of the Plenty and Yarra Rivers. He set up a merchant business in Barwon Terrace by 1846 and partnered his father-in-law, Capt. Charles Swanston, in an extensive number of pastoral leases<sup>5</sup>. Of the many pastoralists associated with Geelong's future, he was one of the few to reside in the town in its infancy. Described by his biographer, J Ann Hone, as '...Of tremendous energy' and active in Geelong's early development, he was a member of the Geelong Literary association, a trustee of the Savings Bank, a member of the Geelong and Portland Bay Immigration Society and trustee of the Botanic Gardens. He was a vocal supporter of the initiation of Geelong's local government and opposed transportation to the new colony. Among many other public roles, he was a member of the provisional committee of the Geelong & Melbourne Railway Co. and chairman of directors of the Geelong & Melbourne Railway Co. and trustee of the Geelong Grammar 1856-7<sup>6</sup>. Willis also pursued merino breeding, developing his property, Koolomurt, into one of the finest studs in the colony. This property was a subdivision of Kout Narin, on the Glenelg River near Harrow, and is not listed as surviving<sup>8</sup>.

Although occupied by Willis for only three years, 242 Ryrie Street is the only building known to survive which was created for Willis and which he occupied.

Of the urban/suburban houses documented in the Geelong Region (with firm dates), Read's St. Helens (1848), Sladen's house (1849-50), Dr. Thomson's Kardinia (1850-5) and Strachan's Lunan (1850-1) are of comparable dates. Within the city of Geelong, Eudoxus, 34 Fenwick Street (1854), Macdonald's cottage at 220 Myers Street and several other small cottages of 1854 are the nearest in date- although none is similar in type (ie. detached medium sized town house).

Hence within its type it is the oldest surviving in Geelong municipality and the third oldest in the region. Historical-

ly, it has a comparable first owner to these two earlier houses in terms of influence in the community.

#### Description

Described from the beginning as of stone with six rooms, a verandah and stabling, the house has rubble stone side-walls and dressed stone front walls. Recent plans show that the stone section contains four main rooms and two ancillary rooms<sup>9</sup>; a formerly detached kitchen is still evident at the rear by its simple hipped roof form.

Shown on the 1854 plan as a square with a central projecting room or bay to the north, the house varies little from the plan form, rate description or siting of the 1850s house.

Roofed as a pyramid-hip over the main section of the house, the northern projecting bay has a higher eaves-line ornamented with unusual pronounced dentilation. The convex verandah form and iron detailing (1880s?) are later than the house but the concave-profile verandah remnants at the side (enclosed) show the original form, with a surviving timber paneled verandah support also resembling those used on early colonial verandahs. An early photo shows the ironwork complete<sup>10</sup>.

The full-length main cedar windows (appearing to be French doors) are both old and unusual and the opening in which they hang has not been visibly altered since construction. Similarly the fan-light to the entrance door is old, although the door itself has been replaced.

Inside, recent stripping of the polished cedar joinery (deep skirtings and typically simple architraves) has damaged the house's integrity but sufficient of the interior remains to allow restoration of the lost parts. The splayed window reveal linings and architraves survive, illustrating both the deep wall thickness and the elegant joinery.

#### External Integrity

(see above)

The stone has been painted, the original verandah has been enclosed, part of the verandah has been replaced sympathetically late last century, the verandah floor has been replaced with concrete, the front door replaced, the front fence and garden removed, and unsympathetic signs added. A large addition at the rear which obscures the rear kitchen form and stone walling, is unrelated visually to the house but is largely concealed in the street view.

#### Streetscape

The house is isolated from the streetscape by its deep set-back but this factor clearly expresses its pre-commercial origins in the street's development. It is contributory to a mixed commercial and residential Edwardian and early Victorian era precinct of low integrity.

1 VB 1854-5, 346

2 loc. cit. *Geelong Advertiser* 11.2.59; VB 1860-1, 470

3 see Willingham GRC historical and architectural survey 1986

4 RB 1880,474; RB 1920, 997; RB1930, 1316; RB1940, 766

5 Billis & Kenyon p161

6 J A Hone, ADB Vol. 6, p.408

7 ibid.

8 see *Heritage Australia* 3/191 Kout Narin itself exists, reputedly built for R B Broughton c1855

9 see Strickland & Assoc. plans job 4645 1972

10 NTA file 1148



#### **Significance**

Architecturally, built of local stone and Geelong's oldest known house, it was also the grandest among the Geelong township houses of the 1850s and retains sufficient detail to allow external restoration. It is the third oldest urban house in the region and is particularly significant for its pre-Gold Rush status; only a small number of major houses were constructed in the region before 1851.

Historically, it was occupied by some of Geelong's early medical practitioners, Walshe and Harris, but it was created for the noted pastoralist, Edward Willis, who unlike many of his pastoral contemporaries, involved himself in Geelong's early urban development. As one of the colony's foremost merino breeders Willis epitomizes Geelong's early prosperity, based on wool, and underscores the town's later dependence on wool-oriented commercial activity. It is the only known house to survive which was created for and lived in by Willis, an important early pastoralist. The building is of State/Regional/Local importance.