

<b>Site:</b>	Former St Heliers Convent	<b>Significance:</b>	A
<b>Address:</b>	Clarke Street/St Heliers Street, Abbotsford	<b>Map Ref:</b>	2D C9
<b>Access:</b>	Restricted	<b>Survey Date:</b>	15/5/98



**Intactness:**  
E  G  F  P

**Condition:**  
E  G  F  P

**Existing Heritage Listings:**

Victorian Heritage Register   
 Register of the National Estate   
 Planning Scheme   
 National Trust

**Recommended Heritage Listings:**

Victorian Heritage Register   
 Register of the National Estate   
 HO Controls

## Description

The site of the former St Heliers Convent was originally purchased as part of Crown Portions 77(23a) & 64 (12a) by Major Henry Smyth of Sydney in 1838, and leased to John Hodgson. In 1842 it was purchased by the Hon. Isaac Erskine Murray and subdivision was commenced. In July of that year, seven acres were sold to John Orr, which became the Abbotsford Estate, and development commenced shortly thereafter. An irregular piece of land to the east was sold to Edward Curr, which became the St Heliers Estate. In 1853 the St Heliers Estate was leased. In 1857, the Abbotsford Estate was sold by Orr, though leased by a Mr Moss. Part of the estate was purchased by The Good Shepherd Sisters in 1863 as their first convent. They purchased the St Heliers estate in 1865. The lower portion of the site, adjacent to the Yarra River was used for utilitarian purposes—fruit and vegetables, livestock, etc. A sketch dated 1901 shows a very young garden, which was probably laid out following the construction of the main convent building, and which was officially opened in that year. Early photographs of the site taken 1912-1915 show a juvenile garden, with few trees of any size, supporting the view that the formal garden was laid out following the construction, or as part of the construction, of the main convent building. The formal garden was rectangular in shape, enclosed to the south and east by hedges, and a fence along the Clarke Street frontage. It featured dense shrubberies with an over canopy of trees, many of which survive today, and a meandering path along the perimeter of the garden.

## Remnant Fabric (Man Made)

The system of paths throughout the garden was laid out in the early 20th century following the construction of the main convent building. The gazebo in the lower section of the garden is also believed to have been constructed at this time.

## Remnant Fabric (Vegetation)

The site contains a large number of mature trees including a Common Oak (*Quercus robur*) near the swimming pool, classified by The National Trust of Australia (Victoria), and another Common Oak recorded by the Trust. Both predate the current garden layout, and may be remnants from the early pre-convent history of the site. The Holm Oak (*Quercus ilex*) adjacent to the main Convent building was planted in 1903. Other trees of note include a remnant River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) at the St Helier Street frontage and a number of very large Pepper Trees (*Schinus molle*) situated throughout the site. Mature Cork Oaks (*Quercus suber*), Dutch Elms (*Ulmus x hollandica*) and screens of Lombardy Poplars (*Populus nigra* 'Italica') are located in the southern section of the site, which was used for pastoral and utilitarian purposes. The southern formal garden contains a number of mature and unusual trees and shrubs such as Moreton Bay Fig (*Ficus macrophylla*) and Puriri (*Vitex lucens*).

## Potential Threats

The site is proposed for residential development. Potential threats as part of this development include removal of mature trees associated with the early history of the site, or alterations to the form of the formal garden in the southern section. Introduction of inappropriate species, not in keeping with the style and character of existing plantings. Continued failure to maintain the grounds of the site to a high standard is also a major threat to its historical and cultural integrity. The southern garden is especially poorly maintained. Many of the trees require specialist arboricultural attention, and weeds, particularly Mirror Bush (*Coprosma repens*) are well established, and threatening original plantings.

## Management Steps

The site requires the preparation of a detailed conservation management plan, particularly for the southern formal garden area. This is especially necessary with the imminent development of the site. The plan should outline the development of the garden, and include policies for the ongoing conservation of the site. An implementation program could then be prepared based on these policies.

**Statement of Significance**

St Heliers convent is regionally significant for the extensive grounds associated with the development of the site, and which provide a suitable setting to the massing and scale of the original convent buildings. The site retains much of its rural ambience, although it is surrounded by urban development. The gardens contain anumber of mature trees, many of which are uncommon in contemporary landscapes. Two of these trees are featured on the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Significant Tree Register.

**Reference**

Chronology prepared by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford.