

Heritage Overlay No.: 007
Citation No.: 226
Place: ‘The Willows’

Other Names of Place: N/A
Location: The Willows Historical Park, 76-82 Reserve Road, Melton
Critical Dates: Original construction: c.mid 1850s.
Existing Heritage Listings: Shire of Melton Planning Scheme (HO7); RNE (State); National Trust (Classified)
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The Willows homestead, 76-82 Reserve Road, Melton, is significant as a moderately intact example of a Victorian styled homestead, as one of few surviving mid nineteenth century homesteads in the Melton Shire, and as a nineteenth century homestead built of unusual rendered random rubble wall construction with sturdy buttresses to the original portion of the dwelling. Situated within The Willows Historical Park, the original homestead is likely to have been built in the mid 1850s.

The Willows homestead is architecturally significant at a LOCAL level (AHC D.2, E.1). It demonstrates original design qualities of a Victorian style and represents one of the few

surviving examples of this type in the Melton Shire. These qualities include the broad hipped, shingle roof form, together with a smaller hipped roof that represents an early addition (which also contributes to the significance of the dwelling), the whole forming an M roof configuration. Other intact or appropriate qualities include the single storey height, encircling verandah supported by solid timber posts, three rendered masonry chimneys with corbelled tops, timber framed double hung multi-paned windows, timber framed door openings, four panelled timber door on the entrance, two small timber framed windows flanking the entrance doorway, smoothly rusticated quoinwork and voussoirs with the keystones having a vermiculation pattern surrounding the window and door openings, and the sturdy rendered masonry buttresses on the original portion of the building.

The Willows homestead is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC A.4, B.2) for its association with the establishment of the local pound, as a scarce example of a reasonably intact building from the original era of farming in the Shire, and for its long association with the Minns family who were prominent in the local community and local government over several generations.

The Willows homestead is scientifically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC F.1). The rendered random rubble wall construction and particularly the sturdy buttresses that project from the original portion of the dwelling, represent an unusual form of nineteenth century construction.

The Willows homestead is socially and aesthetically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC G.1, E.1). It is a local history landmark, recognised for its special picturesque and townscape values by a community that was undergoing rapid transformation. This public sentiment culminated in its purchase and restoration by the Shire with the assistance of the local community and heritage organisations. It is now the headquarters of the Melton and District Historical Society and the centrepiece of a local heritage park.

Overall, The Willows is of LOCAL significance.

Description:

The Willows homestead is a substantial rubble stone and mud mortar farmhouse erected on east bank Toolern Creek. It now forms a landmark in *The Willows* Historical Park, 76-82 Reserve Road, Melton. The dwelling is surrounded by open grassed areas, a corrugated iron garage, an old dairy and a machinery shed, two underground wells and adjacent peppercorn, eucalyptus, and cypress trees in a park setting.

The single storey, symmetrical, rendered random rubble and mud mortar, Victorian styled dwelling is characterised by a broad hipped roof form, together with a smaller hipped roof that represents a later (but early) addition, the whole forming an M roof configuration. These roof forms are clad in introduced timber tiles, having replaced the earlier galvanised corrugated steel roof cladding. Three rendered masonry chimneys with corbelled tops adorn the roofline and there are no eaves. A reconstructed encircling verandah is another distinctive characteristic feature of the place and is supported by solid timber posts. The verandah brackets have been introduced.

Other early features of the design are the timber framed double hung multi-paned windows, timber framed door openings (with a four panelled timber door on the entrance) and the two small timber framed windows flanking the doorway. These openings are emphasised by smoothly rusticated quoinwork and voussoirs, the keystones having vermiculation pattern.

Another distinctive and unusual early feature is the sturdy rendered masonry buttressing on the original portion of the building.

The house in its original form consisted of four rooms with a high-pitched split shingle roof. A roomy cellar was located under the central passageway. The property faced south east. Sometime in the late 1860s the property underwent a major change. Six buttresses were attached to the east and west facades of the old building, and another two were added to the south wall. A two room extension was also added to the rear of the house and this became the new front of the building.

History:

A perpetual spring in the adjacent creek provided a steady supply of fresh water to the site on which the homestead is built. Although we can not be certain of the identity of the builder, the first stage of 'The Willows' homestead appears to have been constructed in the mid 1850s.¹

The house is situated on Crown Allotment No.1 (No Section), Parish of Kororoit, an allotment of 5 acres 3 roods 4 perches.² Although it had surveyed the land, the Crown did not offer it for sale until 22nd November 1861, at which time it was purchased by Charles March Williams.³ (Although the property is directly opposite and immediately adjacent to the Township of Melton, and was sold as 'Suburban Allotment 33', it was situated within the Shire of Braybrook rather than the Shire of Melton until 1917.)

Considerable improvements had taken place on the land prior to the Crown sale. When CM Williams purchased the allotment in November 1861 he paid £235.0 for the land itself, and valued the improvements at £400.⁴ Even allowing for some exaggeration by Williams, this is an extremely high valuation for improvements, and must have included a house.

Some local research has claimed that in 1858 Williams had taken over the interest of a Mr Parkinson in the property, and that Parkinson built the house upon taking possession of the land c.1855.⁵ It was definitely built by 1861, when a map shows a square building on the site marked as 'House'.⁶

The property is important in the district for its association with the establishment of the pound. The district pound had been established in 1854,⁷ when George Scarborough of Mount Cottrell (Mt Cottrell Road, south of Greigs Road) was appointed pound-keeper. Scarborough resigned in 1857. The pound was moved to Melton following agitation from local farmers and Charles March Williams appointed pound-keeper on 26th April 1858.⁸

¹ In a letter from the Shire of Melton to the National Trust (1/10/1975) it is reported that after further research, 'the probable time of construction of 'The Willows' is now confidently put at 1855.' It is stated, without evidence, that the house is believed to have been built by a Mr Parkinson at that time, and 'was certainly in existence in 1856.' (National Trust, File No.2482)

² Parish Plan, Parish of Kororoit.

³ Sale Special lands 22nd October 1861 (Government Gazette)

⁴ Special Lands Purchase 22 – 10- 1861

⁵ Johnstone, C, 'Rural Heritage Study: Western Region of Melbourne', Context Pty Ltd / Melbourne Western Region Inc (pp.126-127), citing MDHS research in support of National Trust nomination. Also, Starr, J, *Melton: Plains of Promise* (Shire of Melton, nd, c.1985), p.127.

⁶ Lands Victoria, P/A Plan K74A (1861)

⁷ Government Gazette 1854

⁸ Government Gazette 1858

Williams, the son of a doctor, had been born in London. Reminiscences of local residents of the time, as recorded in the *Express* newspaper, note Williams' success in breeding horses on the property. Sales of up to 60 guineas were noted. Whether this was from Williams's own stock or from unclaimed pound stock is not made clear.⁹ Williams appeared before a government inquiry in 1860 and advocated registration of all stock brands in the State.¹⁰

Williams died in 1862 leaving a widow, Catherine, and five living children aged 15 years to five months. At the time of his death Williams had entered negotiations with one Matthew Devenish and had a mortgage of £100 on allotments 1 and 2, Parish of Kororoit.¹¹

Catherine Williams was appointed pound-keeper on 2 September 1863, with her eldest son Charles as her assistant.

Her tenure was short for on 22nd March 1864 George Minns senior paid Matthew Devenish £135 for allotments 1 and 2 Parish of Kororoit (considerably less than Williams had claimed the property was worth in 1861) and on the same day paid William Tullidge £45 for the adjoining allotments 3 and 4.¹²

In April 1867, James Ebden Minns, the newly married son of George senior became the owner of *The Willows* property having entered into a mortgage arrangement with his father to the extent of £200. At the time George Minns was residing in Kaarimba having left Melton in 1867 for a short trip to England and upon his return having taken up a selection in the Kaarimba district with his son Frederick who had a hotel licence there.¹³ James paid out the mortgage on 2-1-1873.¹⁴ James Minns was appointed pound-keeper in 1872; in 1885 the pound was moved elsewhere and Minns purchased the old pound site and added it to his farm.¹⁵

The Willows residence underwent a major change about this time. A two room extension, similar in style but with a lower elevation was added to the original rear of the house with a chimney matching the distinctive originals. Window arrangements did not match the original but became a feature of the façade when the new addition became the front of the building. Six buttresses were attached to the east and west walls of the old building, two to the south wall and the whole rendered with mortar to give the appearance of dressed stonework around the windows. Galvanized iron was placed over the shingles and a verandah added on three sides.¹⁶

By 1876 *The Willows* was the homestead for a thriving mixed farm of 340 acres of which 156 was rented from a H. Ruck.¹⁷ In October of that year the *Australasian* travelling reporter visited and reported on the property. In common with the nearly every other property in the district the farm had 'recently' (generally within the last two years) abandoned cultivation of crops, and turned over completely to cattle pasture. Butter making was the principal occupation of the

⁹ James Luke Robertson, 'Melton Reminiscences', *Bacchus Marsh Express*, October - November 1905

¹⁰ Starr, *op cit*, p.127

¹¹ Shire Records:- Research, Allotment 1 & 2, Parish of Kororoit (n.d.)

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *Bacchus Marsh Express*, 9/3/1867. George died in Waaia, 2/10/1875, and his body was returned to the Melton Cemetery for burial (Grave 3, Compartment 13, Church of England section).

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Starr, *op cit*, pp.42, 129. This is likely to have been Section 3A, of 2 acres - the eastern side of the present site.

¹⁶ Note that the National Trust (File 2482) notes the possibility that the smaller building was the original. This suggestion is echoed by the Australian Heritage Commission in its Register of the National Estate citation (Place 5492).

¹⁷ Shire of Melton, *Ratebook*, 1876

farm, which had about 50 head of cattle, a large proportion of which were milking cows. The reporter also noted that a ‘large number of pigs are kept upon this farm and are found to be very profitable stock’. Their manure was used in an orchard and garden in which ‘large quantities of lucerne and prairie grass are grown for the use of stock when ordinary feed is scarce’.¹⁸

Two bores attached to deep brick lined wells supplied water for the house in addition to the farm. A commodious timber barn and necessary sheds had also been constructed.

Access to the property was improved following the construction of the bluestone ford across the creek c.1887, when the recreation ground came into use. Prior to this date it may have been that the crossing referred to as ‘Mr Minns bridge’ was used. This appears to have been a flimsy structure and has but two references in Council reports in the *Melton Express* in the 1880’s.

It is believed that in the late 1890’s a timber building was added near the rear of the building to house a kitchen, ablutions and laundry rooms and rooms for seasonal workers. This was attached to the house by means of a trellised walkway using the original front entry to the house (long since the back door). A photograph of this building appears in a local history of Melton.¹⁹ This was demolished in recent decades during the period when the house was tenanted (after the Minns family had left).

James Minns son, George, took over the property following his marriage to Alice Walsh in 1903. James and Caroline moved into a house on the former JH Games property at the eastern end of Henry Street.²⁰ George held the position of Shire Secretary for Melton for 40 years. He was a most prominent member of the community being Secretary to, among others, the Melton Coursing Club, the Shooting Club and the Cemetery Trust. He also rode with the hunting parties who sported across the Plains and were entertained at Mount Kororoit.

George and Alice had one son, Norman who followed his father into local government and became Secretary of the Shire of Werribee completing a record term in this position. George retired to Werribee in 1951, where he died in 1965.

The National Trust records note that James Ebdon Minns and his sons were ‘leading men of the district, Justices of the Peace, and Shire Councillors’. It claims that Sir Thomas Bent was a frequent visitor.²¹

The Willows passed into the hands of George’s grandson, Bruce Minns and the property was let for a number of years. In the 1960s it became vacant and was subject to vandalism. Major structural problems arose with the part demolition of the roof, the loss of windows and doors and holes dug into and under the floorboards. The outbuildings were particularly targeted.

Following widespread public support, the Shire of Melton purchased the house, with 3.75 acres of land, in 1972. In 1975 the Shire of Melton and the Melton and District Historical Society were successful in nominating the building for National Trust classification, and then the Australian Heritage Commission’s Register of the National Estate. The AHC particularly noted its ‘townscape importance’. It was envisaged that the farmhouse would form ‘a picturesque centrepiece to Melton’s planned ... historical park, along with Dunvegan bluestone cottage ... and similar structures as they become available.’²²

¹⁸ *The Australasian*, 21st October 1876

¹⁹ Starr, *op cit*, p.128

²⁰ Crown Portions 6-9, Section 23, Township of Melton, Parish of Djerriwarrah

²¹ National Trust card on property No.2482.

²² *Sunbury Regional Gazette*, 4th November 1976.

In a time of great Melton's 'satellite city' development the Council spelt out its broader vision in its submission to the AHC:

'Melton is destined to become, by the end of the present century, a city of between 75,000 and 100,000 people. Significant relics of the past, such as 'The Willows', regrettably will be rare in that situation. It is essential that sufficient tangible links with Melton's pioneering days remain to promote in the new community a sense of history and continuity'.²³

Under the direction of 'The Willows' Restoration Committee and consultant architect John Hitch, all outbuildings, with the exception of the garage and toilet, were demolished and the dwelling house restored. Finances were provided by the Shire of Melton and the National Estate Grants Program, and considerable amount of voluntary labour was provided by the local community. The orchard was removed, and remaining wooden buildings were relocated to provide an open vista for visitors to the Park. The property was furnished with donations from district families keen to preserve this example of pioneer life in the area. The Willows became the headquarters of the Melton and District Historical Society.

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: 'Farming', 'Community'

Known Comparable Examples in Melton Shire:

Architecturally, *The Willows* represents one of the earlier surviving mid nineteenth century homesteads in the Melton Shire. Other comparable examples are as follows:

- *Strathulloh* homestead, Greigs Road, Melton South (Place Id. 286). This property was established in 1840, although the existing homestead was not built until c.1869. It shares similar Victorian design qualities as *The Willows*, as noted in the broad hipped roof form, rendered chimneys, single storey appearance and encircling verandah. However, *Strathulloh* is constructed of random coursed bluestone. There is also an early kitchen that forms part of the significant building fabric. This homestead is included on the Victorian Heritage Register.
- *Eynesbury* homestead, Eynesbury Road, Melton South (Place Id. 281). The original section of the homestead was built in the early 1870s. Unlike *The Willows*, this Victorian styled dwelling is two storey and is Colonial Georgian in appearance, having been constructed of bluestone. Like *The Willows*, the building has experienced additions, including the single storeyed bay windowed side wings that date from the 1880s and probably the concave verandah. This homestead is included on the Victorian Heritage Register.
- *Exford* homestead, 255 Exford Road, Melton South (Place Id.269). The central portion of this homestead possibly represents the earliest surviving homestead building in the Melton Shire, having been constructed in c.1843 of pise. Unlike *The Willows*, Exford is design in what has been termed a Colonial Gothic style, a rare style in the Melton Shire. The building has an elongated hipped roof form with projecting dormer windows,

²³ Shire of Melton, 'Restoration of 'The Willows' (Submission to the Interim Council of the National Estate, August 1975), p.5

together with a number of additions. This homestead is included on the Victorian Heritage Register.

- *Glencoe* homestead, 416 Blackhill Road (Place Id.5). Built in c.1860s-70s, this dwelling features a similar broad hipped roof form as *The Willows*, although the main roof terminates into a broken back encircling verandah (the concept of the encircling verandah being similar to *The Willows*). The roof is adorned by rendered masonry chimneys with multi-corbelled tops – the whole designed in a similar Victorian style. Unlike *The Willows*, *Glencoe* is constructed of coursed squared rubble bluestone.
- *Rocklands* homestead, 211 Mount Aitken Road (Place Id. 391), Aitkens Gap. Built in the late 1850s, this dwelling has a similar Victorian stylistic appearance and rendered wall finish as *The Willows*. The hipped roof form is clad in galvanised corrugated steel (a more familiar nineteenth century roof cladding) and there is a projecting pitched roof addition at the rear. Overall, the homestead appears to be of similar integrity as *The Willows*. There are paired timber eaves brackets and unusual label moulds above the windows and doors.

Overall therefore, *The Willows* represents an early example of a Victorian styled homestead in the Melton Shire, with unusual rendered random rubble wall construction and sturdy buttresses. Historically and architecturally, it is comparable to *Strathulloh*, *Glencoe* and *Rocklands* homesteads.

Condition:

Good

Integrity:

Moderately intact

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the Melton Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay.

Recommended Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls:

External Paint Controls:	<i>No</i>
Internal Alteration Controls:	<i>No</i>
Tree Controls:	<i>Yes - cypress tree by the cowbail; pepper tree by the opening memorial; memorial avenue of gum trees along path; and tall gum tree in north-west corner.</i>
Outbuildings and/or Fences:	<i>Yes – the Memorial Gates from State School 430.</i>

Other Recommendations:

- The preparation of a Conservation Management Plan is recommended for the house and grounds.