

Introduction

The Aborigines of the Wurundjeri tribe occupied the Yarra Valley for centuries. In December 1836, John Gardiner, Joseph Hawdon and John Hepburn arrived overland with cattle from Murrumbidgee and set up a 'run' stretching from Bulleen and Kew to Brighton. Thirty years later in 1866, in the most fashionable European Italianate style, Coonac House was built on a smaller subdivision lot of the station in Toorak.

Now, one hundred and twenty years later, the Wurundjeri tribe has died out and Gardiner's Station has been closely subdivided to form the South Eastern suburbs of Melbourne. But Coonac still stands largely intact on its original subdivision lot, the oldest surviving mansion of the Crown allotments 26/27/28/29 sold in 1849.

The following history traces the development of Toorak into a prestigious suburb from its beginning as part of John Gardiner's cattle run, and also traces the network of ownership and associates of Coonac who played a significant social and political role in the formation of the character of Victorian Toorak and in a more indirect way, the State of Victoria."

The Early Development of Toorak

The first Europeans arrived in the Yarra Valley when in February 1803 a survey party led by Charles Grimes made a brief trip up the Yarra River as far as Dight's Falls. It was not until 1836 with the arrival of John Gardiner and his partners that any settlement was made. The settlers who arrived with Batman's and Fawkner's party in 1835 occupied the flatter land on the western side of Port Phillip Bay. Other squatters arrived and remained in the Lower Yarra Valley until the early 1850's.

Concurrent with the arrival of the squatters was the introduction of land licensing regulations initiated by Governor Bourke and the land surveys led by Robert Hoddle. This culminated in 1840 with the enforcement of a decree passed in Britain for the sale of Crown Land. The immediate result of land sales was for more permanent settlement to replace the squatters holdings.

In 1840's the land between the Yarra River and Toorak Road was sold in lots of up to sixty acres. Most residential development was located here, north of Toorak Road and west of Williams Street, it included such houses as Bona Vista, Como and Balmerino.

In 1849 James Jackson purchased a large area of land on the north side of Toorak Road where he built 'Toorak House' and on the south side between Toorak Road and Malvern Road he owned allotments 26-28 which included the future subdivision lot of Coonac House.

Shortly after Jackson's death Toorak House became the Governor's residence from 1854-74. This event significantly influenced the subsequent development of Toorak into a most desirable residential area.

The land was bought by the wealthy classes and as William Kelly described in 1853 "to keep the profane multitude at a distance, paddocks instead of patches of land were put into the market, and the purchasers, who were mostly of the settling class were thus enabled to build fine dwellings and surround themselves with gardens and pleasure-grounds ..... the price which the land fetched debarred any one but persons of means from invading its exclusive neighbourhood".

In 1859 Alfred Ross purchased Crown allotment 29 (on the west side of Orrong Road) and half of allotment 28 (on the east side) in all, 83 acres of land and built Orrong House. This was one of the earliest substantial residences in the area together with Toorak House and Como.

During the mid 1860's a portion of Orrong Estate was subdivided and sold off. Only a handful of houses belonging to wealthy gentlemen had been built there by the late 1860's. One of these gentlemen was Robert Bruce Ronald who bought a block in 1866 and built a house naming it San Souci (Coonac) in 1867.

R.B. Ronald had arrived in Australia in 1852 and built up a prosperous mercantile and squatting firm with his partners, Richard Gibbs, James MacBain and his brother Byron Lord Ronald. In 1865 the firm was sold to Australian Mortgage, Land and Finance Co. Ltd. for a good will sum of £70,000, becoming the Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Co. Ltd.

R.B. Ronald was very close to his friend and partner James MacBain, becoming joint Victorian managers of the Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Co. in 1868. They lived as neighbours and when in 1869 MacBain built his own house in Irving Road it was a short distance from Coonac. It is possible that the architects, Reed and Barnes who designed MacBain's house were also involved in the design of Ronald's house. Sir James MacBain later became Chairman of the firm for 25 years, a member of the Legislative Assembly from 1864 and President of the Legislative Council from 1883, and knighted in 1886. Both men were Scots Presbyterians donating large funds to the foundation of the Presbyterian Church at 603 Toorak Road (now Toorak United Church) which was design by Reed and Barnes. R.B. Ronald, owned numerous pastoral stations in Western Victoria, New South Wales and cattle stations and sugar plantation and mill in Queensland. He also assisted in financing through the Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Co. Ltd. other ventures most notably George Fairbairn who was the pioneer of the Australian frozen meat export trade.

On his departure for England in 1875, R.B. Ronald sold Coonac to Thomas Armstrong. Armstrong was also a Scots Presbyterian and Victorian pastoralist. He owned the adjoining station to R.B. Ronald in Western Victoria and together with his father was an outstanding pioneer sheep breeder and wool producer in Victoria. His Grandfather had migrated to Australia in the 1830's and settled at Bush Station and River Station on Port Phillip bay. They were vast stations, the area included the present site of Geelong city and extended to Torquay.

In 1880 T. Armstrong sold Coonac House to Mrs Isabella Affleck. She had married into a Scots Presbyterian pastoralist family who owned extensive sheep stations in Western Victoria. All these families of Ronald, Armstrong and Affleck are recorded in Henderson's Australian Families (1943) as being pioneer pastoralists who settled on enormous stations around Port Phillip Bay and in the Western District of Victoria.

In 1884 Archibald Menzies purchased Coonac from Mrs I. Affleck. He was the owner of the Menzies Hotel built in 1867 by the architects Reed and Barnes. The hotel has since been demolished.

In 1887 John Robb, an engineer and railway contractor, bought Coonac. He had arrived in Victoria in 1854 originally working as a contractor on the Goldfields. He became very successful being commissioned to remove Batman's Hill in preparation for the building of Spencer Street Railway Station in 1863. His work included water supply distribution systems, drainage and sewer works, but he is largely known for his railway construction work in the Western district of Victoria, East Gippsland, South and Western Australia.

He was one of the founders of the Federal Bank and Melbourne Hydraulic Power Co. By 1889 he held considerable areas of land, pastoral and cattle stations, sugar plantations and land in Melbourne including "Robbs' Buildings" reputedly the highest structure in Melbourne in 1885.

Prior to his move to Coonac, Robb subdivided and sold off his previous home, Springfield in Orrong Road. His son-in-law, Alfred Dunn, designed three houses on the subdivision and a number of other homes in the area including 'Werndrew' a large Boom Style house designed for Jenkin Collier in 1890 on the southern section of Greenwich House Estate. His work may also have included renovations and additions to Coonac, as illustrations of his furniture designs for Coonac were published in the Building, Engineering and Mining Journal (7.6.1890). Alfred Dunn died of typhoid at the age of 28 years in 1892.

By the mid 1893 with the end of the land boom and widespread Depression, John Robb was in serious financial trouble. He had large rural losses and the collapse of the inflated value of his real estate left him £680,000 in debt. The Federal Bank was closed and an investigation revealed Robb's part in the milking of funds by Directors. John Robb's house was taken over by the Federal Bank and leased to Elizabeth Robb. John Robb died in 1896. Coonac was not the only house in the area to have a mortgage foreclosed. Many other large residences were listed in the Prahran rate books with names of banks and finance companies as owners.

The Federal Bank continued to own Coonac, leasing it to tenants until 1899 when an associated finance company Melbourne Trust Co. took over the house.

In 1907 William Baillieu, Financier and Politician, purchased Coonac and lived there during the height of his political career until 1914 when Mrs. J. Collins bought Coonac. The Net Annual Value of the rates for Coonac had declined from £600 p.a. in 1889 to £45 in 1920. Mrs. Stanley Forrest Hammond bought Coonac in 1920 and lived there with her family for the next twenty-three years. They leased it to the Legion of Ex-Servicemen in 1943 and for a time it was used as a Woman's Hostel. But in 1948 the Department of Social Services purchased it for use as an Outpatient Centre under the Department's Rehabilitation Scheme. Coonac was opened as a Rehabilitation Centre in 1950 and has operated in this capacity for the past thirty six years.

Of all the early houses on allotment 26-28 purchased by James Jackson few remain, still fewer remain with their original subdivision block basically intact. Coonac belongs to the latter category. It escaped subdivision common for large mansions during the depression years of 1892/3 and 1920s. The Commonwealth ownership has saved it from subdivision in the 1950s and 60s when many mansions were demolished to make way for blocks of flats.

Today Coonac remains as a substantial example of an early Picturesque Italianate house, a notable example in the development of Australian house design.

## ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS OF COONAC

### Background

The Gold Rush in Victoria brought an influx of architects to Melbourne. They were largely trained in Britain, the basis of much of their theory and style was derived from Palladio's work and books printed in 1570. His ideas were followed by Inigo Jones whose design of Convent Garden in 1630 (demolished) became a classic of English architectural tradition. The English translations of Palladio's work appeared from 1715 onwards and marked the beginning of the Palladian movement in Britain with architects such as Campbell, Kent, Lord Burlington, and Wood using his principles of design.

From the mid C18th the idea of taking a historic view of ancient classical architecture rather than purely applying its principles as laid out by Palladio gave rise to a Neo-classic concept in design. This was essentially a Romantic or Picturesque style of architecture as the power to choose between historic styles or combine elements from different styles became acceptable. By the second half of the C19th any style was acceptable, heavy Romanesque, Gothics, opulent Renaissance or Baroque.

It is against this tradition that architecture in mid C19th Melbourne should be viewed and in particular the architectural style of Coonac.

Initially the solemn and massive dignity of the Italianate/Palladian style was considered proper for large public buildings in Melbourne which were symbols of culture, such as Parliament House (1856 Kerr and Knight), Melbourne Public Library (1854 J. Reed), Treasury Building (1857-62 J.J. Clarke). Churches were designed largely in the Gothic style and houses remains in the simple Georgian form.

Gradually the Italianate style was introduced into domestic buildings. The first Italianate house in Australia was Rosedale in Tasmania built in 1847. In Melbourne, the Italianate character of Toorak house (1850) was greatly enhanced when it was converted and enlarged as the Governor's residence in 1854. This put the seal of approval on the use of the Italianate style for domestic work. Other houses followed, Bishops Court (1853), Charnwood (1855), Frogmore (1856 J. Reed), Orrong (Grey Lodge c.1850).

### Coonac

Coonac built in 1866/7 belongs in the line of traditional Italianate residences. Although the designer is not known, it could possibly be extrapolated from the evidence of the close friendship between R.B. Ronald, the owner of Coonac and J. MacBain, that the architect, Joseph Reed who designed MacBain's house in 1868 could also have been involved with Ronald's house 1866/7.

In 1867 Joseph Reed called for tenders in the Argus for a large house, office and outbuildings in Clendon Road. Although this is too late to be connected with Coonac it indicates that J. Reed had a reputation for domestic work within the area. J. Reed is the initial designer of Ripponlea (1868-76) which is built in a Lombardic Romanesque polychrome brick style which contrasts strongly with the stuccoed Italianate houses like Coonac. However, he did use the Italianate style again in other houses such as Fairlie (1870) and Eildon (1871).

It is difficult to associate any architect with the design of Coonac without written evidence. This is further complicated by the fact that Coonac distinctly displays two different architectural styles. It's design essentially belongs to the first style of the earlier Italianate houses with simple unadorned stucco work characteristic of such residences of the 1860s as Rostella (1868, J.M. Barry), Greenwich (1870 Leonard Terry), Fairholme (1873 Crouch and Wilson). The second style present in a limited area of the canted bay window is associated with the Mannerist and Baroque detailing of the Boom Style houses of the late 1880s. However, to this could be added the overall arrangement of the basic massing of solids and voids in the design of Coonac which is more commonly seen in Boom Style residences built 10-25 years later.

Coonac has a two-storey arcaded loggia which returns to form an L-shape. The columns are cast iron with corinthian capitals. The L-shaped loggia is placed between two projecting two-storey height bay windows. The entrance is marked by a slightly projecting two-storey pedimented portico. This picturesque massing is particularly evident in the dramatic design of Kawarau (1884) and the Baroque Labassa (1890, J.A.B. Koch). It can be seen in other houses with similar Mannerist or Baroque detailing, Merridale (1884-5) has an L-shaped two-storey arcaded loggia supported on corinthian columns with barley sugar shafts, Ravenswood (1890) also has an L-shaped arcaded two-storey loggia with narrowly spaced vaults and the stucco is heavily decorated with Mannerist detailing.

It could be suggested that the asymmetrical massing of the design of Coonac may have been due to later remodelling similar to that which occurred at St. Georges, a house built in 1867 in Clendon Road. This house was later restyled in 1876/8 by Charles Webb, renamed Mandeville Hall for Joseph Clarke. However this is not supported by evidence from the Prahran Rates books nor by written evidence from R.B. Ronald in 1868/9 when he clearly stated that Coonac was the largest and grandest house in the neighbourhood. Furthermore the treatment of the square bay windows and L-shaped loggia quite clearly represents an early Italianate design. The later mannerist detailing is limited to one area, the canted bay window which may be a later addition. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that the canted bay window has a hiproof and heavy bracketed eaves which contrasts strongly with the balustraded parapet of the loggia and square bay window. In addition the window treatment of the canted bay window is markedly different from those of the square bay window. It is this one element which when added to the loggia and square bay window gives Coonac a massing arrangement associated with later architectural styles. The canted bay windows became a standard element in Italianate houses from the mid 1870s. The work could have been done by the architect, Alfred Dunn, who lived with his father-in-law, John Robb, the owner of Coonac from 1888 - 1894.

Alfred Dunn was responsible for several large Boom Style houses in the area at the time. These included three houses on the Springfield Estate and another for Jenkin Collier in Irving Road. Dunn was also involved with designing furniture for Coonac and has tentatively been connected with the design of the magnificent staircase in the stairwell at Coonac.

However, it is unlikely that the canted bay window at Coonac is an addition as the chimney stack serving this room is of the same unique design as others found at Coonac. Restyling may have occurred but Coonac, today, is largely as it was designed in 1867.

Internally the plan of Coonac is unusual and like the external massing configuration, is more commonly seen in houses built 10-20 years later. The symmetrical vestibule and linear stair hall has been replaced by a central stairwell with a first storey arcaded loggia, top lit by a beautifully stained glass roof lantern. This feature looks back to Regency England and John Verge's work in Australia and forwards to the development of the diagonal axis layouts of Ussher and Kemp. The use of a central stair well became a fundamental stage in the evolution of the Australian house design. It can be seen in later houses such as J.A.B. Koch's Oxford house in Hawthorn built in 1888 and Mynda designed by L. Tayler in 1886 in Kew, and Bundoora Homestead by S.H. Wilson in 1899.

The internal joinery at Coonac is particularly beautiful, most notably the double spaced dark carved timber staircase and the dark and light timber inlaid geometrically patterned parquetry floor. Each of the main rooms is finely detailed with intricately modelled ceiling roses set in a bold and deeply coiffeured ceiling.

However, redecorating was common and would not indicate the authorship of Coonac's architectural design.

Coonac is particularly Australian in design, adopting the neo-classic and picturesque concepts of C19th English architecture to suit a hotter and harsher climate by the use of a wide two-storey loggia or piazza. This provided a cool shaded space around the main rooms and further protected these rooms from the heat and glare of the sun.

Coonac is architecturally very interesting as it forms a link between the restrained style of the earlier Italianate residences and the extravagant boom style mansions of the 1880's and early 90's. The architectural link goes beyond this, forming a bridge between the Italianate houses and the diagonal axis layouts of the Queen Anne style villas, especially seen in the work of Ussher and Kemp in the late C19th and early C20th.



COONAC : SUMMARY OF DATES

Dates	:	Acres	N.A.V.
:	:	:	£
1849	:James Jackson, owner of Toorak House buys :Crown allotments 26-28 including future :subdivision lot of Coonac.	:	:
1854	:Toorak House becomes the Governors :residence until 1874.	:	:
1859	:Alfred Ross purchases Crown allotment 29 :and 28 and builds Orrong House.	:	:
1860	:Portion of Orrong Estate is sold off.	:	:
1865/6	:R.B. Ronald buys block in Orrong Estate.	:	:
1867	:R.B. Ronald's house is completed and he :names it San Souci (12 room, office and :stables).	: 3.3	: £350
1868	:Yar-Orrong Estate allotments 26 and 27 are :sold off in 22 lots. McBain, J. rents the :house next to his friend and co Manager of :Australian Mortgage and Finance Co. :R.B. Ronald.	:	:
1869	:R.B. Ronald's house now listed as Brick :house with 20 rooms. :McBain's house in progress in Irving Road :designed by Reed and Barnes.	:	: £380
1872	:R.B. Ronald's house Brick house 24 room :and lodge.	:	: £340
1874	:R.B. Ronald's house reclassified in :Pahran Rates Books - Brick house 14 rooms.	:	: £300
1875	:R.B. Ronald sells to Armstrong T. Brick :house 14 room and land.	:	: £300
1880	:Armstrong, T. sells to Mrs. I. Affleck :a Brick house 14 rooms.	: 3.3	: £400
1884	:Mrs. I. Affleck sells Coonac house to :Archibald Menzies (Brick house 14 rooms).	: 3.3	: £400
1887	:Menzies, A. sells Coonac to J. Robb, :Railway Contractor, Engineer and a Director :of the Federal Bank.	: 3.3	: £400
1889	:J. Robb's son-in-law Alfred Dunn, Architect :resides at Coonac, designs furniture and :possibly additions to Coonac.	:	: £500



COONAC : SUMMARY OF DATES (Cont'd.)

Dates		:	Acres	:	N.A.V.
		:	:	:	£
1894	:J. Robb declared insolvent.	:	:	:	
	:A. Dunn dies (1892).	:	:	:	
	:	:	:	:	
1895/6	:Federal Bank takes over Coonac, leased to	:	:	:	
	:E. Robb. John Robbs dies.	:	:	:	
	:	:	:	:	
1899-	:Federal banks passes Coonac to Melbourne	:	:	:	
1906	:Trust Co.	:	:	:	
	:	:	:	:	
1907-14	:William Baillieu purchases Coonac.	:	:	:	
	:	:	:	:	
1914-20	:Mrs. J. Collins buys Coonac.	:	:	:	
	:	:	:	:	
1920-	:Mrs. Stanley Forrest Hammond and family	:	:	:	£45
	:lived at Coonac for the next 23 years.	:	:	:	
	:	:	:	:	
1943	:Coonac is leased to W.A.A.F. and Legion of	:	:	:	
	:Ex-Servicemen and Women and used as a	:	:	:	
	:Woman's hostel.	:	:	:	
	:	:	:	:	
1948	:Coonac was purchases by Department of	:	:	:	
	:Social Service for use as an Outpatients	:	:	:	
	:Centre.	:	:	:	
	:	:	:	:	
1950	:Rehabilitation Centre open.	:	:	:	

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RR 678/192

Area No. 72

Drainage Plan No. 173921

Detail Plan No. 974

Litho No. 974

Municipality Prebron

Owner M. Mary Williams Teorak Rd Teorak

Agent W. B. Griffith RR Elizabeth St City

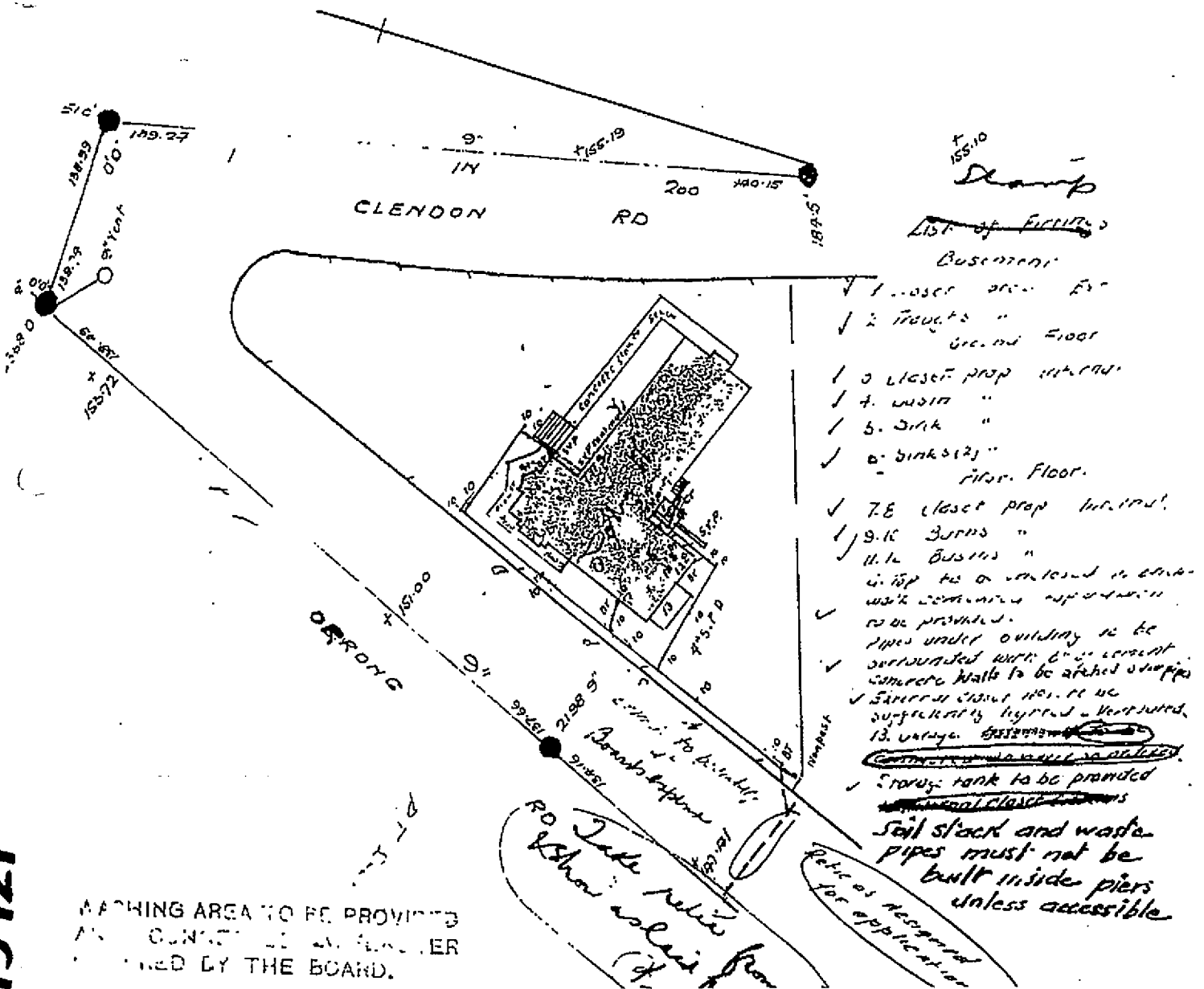
Board to call for tenders  
Prepare plan and estimate.

Owner's plan submitted for approval  
Prepare plan only.

Assessment

Property applied for Clendon Rd South East corner Orrong Rd

Plotted from  
Owners plan &  
measurements



WASHING AREA TO BE PROVIDED  
AS A CONDITION OF THE PERMIT  
ISSUED BY THE BOARD.

00173921

PIA

83 Clendon Rd

No. 974

Plan No. 974

Drainage Plan No. 173921

## PLAN OF DRAINAGE

FOR

M. Mary Williams Teorak R<sup>o</sup> Teorak Owner

W. B. Griffin 44 Elizabeth St Melbourne Agent

MUNICIPALITY: PRAHRAN

## REFERENCE:

T. Boundary Trap

R.T. Reflux Trap

E.V. Educt Vent

S.T. Silt Trap

I.V. Induct Vent

C.I.P. Cast Iron Pipe

S.I.V.P. Soil Induct Vent Pipe

G.W.I.P. Galv. Wrought Iron Pipe

S.V.P. Soil Vent Pipe

G.I.T. Grease Interceptor Trap

S.P.D. Stoneware Pipe Drain

V.P. Ventilating Pipe

G.S.T. Gully Silt Trap

I.C. Inspection Chamber

M.F. Mica Flap

S.V. Stop Valve

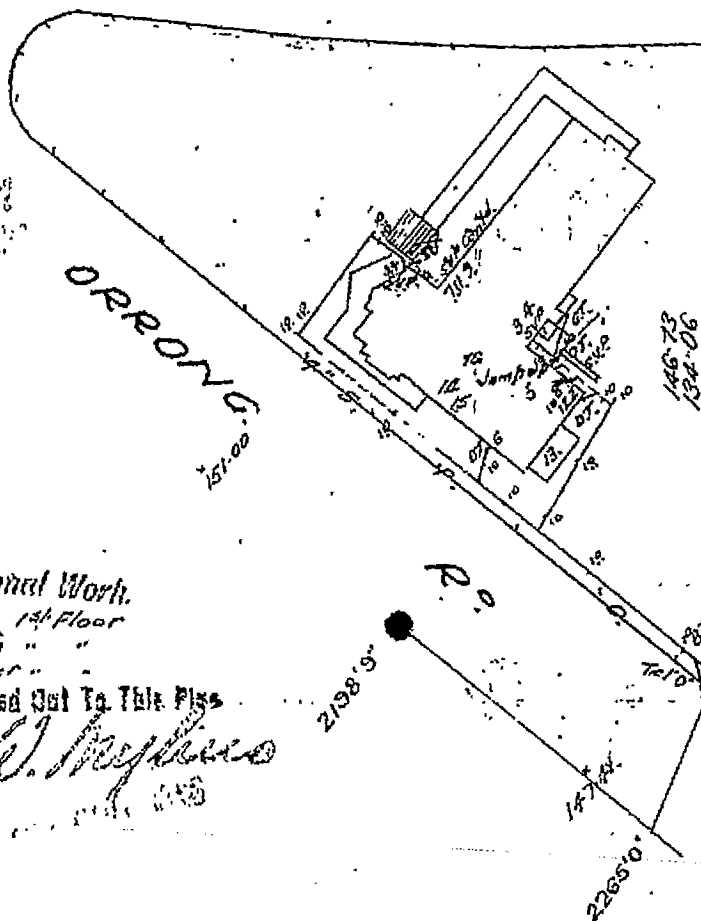
I.O. Inspection Opening

T.I.T. Triple Interceptor Trap

Scale—40 feet to 1 inch

(See By-Law No.19)

GLENDON

R<sup>o</sup>

## Additional Work.

12 Bath 1st Floor

15 Basin "

16 Shower "

Mark Carried Out To This Plan

W. B. Griffin

Basement.

1. Closet proposed ext.

2. Troughs.

Ground Floor.

3. Closet proposed Intl.

4. Basin

5. Sink

6. Sinks(2)

First Floor.

7.8. Closets proposed Intl.

9.10 Baths.

11.12 Basins.

13. Garage Basement.

G.T. top to be enclosed in

brickwork, cemented top &amp;

apron to be provided.

Pipes under building to be

surrounded with 6" of

cement concrete walls to be

arched over pipes.

Storage tank to be provided

external closet not to be

sufficiently lighted &amp;

ventilated.

Soil stack &amp; waste pipes must

not be built inside piers.

unless accessible.

Washing Area to be provided

&amp; connected whenever ordered

by the Board.

Alteration shown in Drawing

Not done

Alteration shown in Drawing

00173921