

HERITAGE CITATION REPORT

Name	Former Elizabeth Fry Retreat Laundry, 83 Argo Street, South Yarra		
Address	83 Argo Street SOUTH YARRA	Significance Level	A2
Place Type	Welfare/Accommodation, Reformatory		
Citation Date	2013		



Former Elizabeth Fry Retreat Laundry

Recommended VHR No HI No PS Yes
Heritage Protection

History and Historical Context

Argo Reserve was formerly the site of the Elizabeth Fry Retreat, a refuge and training centre for women in need - especially those released from jail. It was established in 1885 by the Swinborn family, who were Quakers, and named after Elizabeth Fry, an English philanthropist (also a Quaker) who had focused on prison reform.[1]

The Elizabeth Fry Retreat initially occupied a former residence with various outbuildings, including a laundry, sited on the rear boundary. Laundry work accounted for about two thirds of the Retreat's revenue at a time when most households were without washing machines.

In 1914, the old residence at the Elizabeth Fry Retreat was demolished and replaced by a double-storey building designed by architect J V T Ward.[2] The new building had red-brick walls and timber verandah facing Argo Street. The 1914 MMBW plan of drainage for the new building appears to show the outbuildings and laundry unchanged at this time.[3]

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Conditions in the old laundry were reported to be appalling but improvements were delayed by lack of funds. By September 1926, plans for a new laundry had been drawn up by the architect responsible for the 1914 building.[4] Permission to rebuild a portion of the laundry and to renovate the washhouse was granted by the Charities Board in April 1927.[5]

Fundraising efforts stalled and it was not until June 1929 that a decision was made to commence building of the laundry.[6] When all eighteen tenderers came in above budget it was decided to trim the plans by omitting a coke shed and soap rooms and using a 'ready-made' garage. The opening ceremony took place on the 3 May, 1930.[7] According to Malone, the 'old building' (i.e. laundry) was 'retained and rearranged' at this time, rather than rebuilt.

In August 1932, plans for a new washhouse were drawn up but fund raising was made difficult by the Great Depression. In March the following year, the *Argus* reported on plans for improving the Elizabeth Fry Retreat laundry, describing the old laundry as '40 years old and almost useless'.[8] Completed in August 1933, the new laundry was a 116ft (35 metre) long building with a large washhouse, copper room and drying room.[9] An unexpected donation left the Retreat with enough money to also build a high brick boundary wall.[10]

The Elizabeth Fry Retreat was taken over by the Melbourne City Mission in 1943. The Retreat moved away from its original role as a refuge for female ex-prisoners and became known as an institution for young female wards of the state.[11] Laundry work was perceived more as punishment than an opportunity for domestic training and there were disturbing newspaper reports of girls being detained in a dark cellar for offences such as running away.

In 1957, the Elizabeth Fry Retreat was renamed Swinborn Lodge and became a hostel for girls aged fourteen to eighteen.[12] Laundry work was abolished and the laundry buildings converted into bedrooms. The Lodge closed in 1977 when the property was handed over to Prahran Council and redeveloped as a public reserve.[13] All of the buildings aside from a portion of the laundry on the north boundary and a high red-brick wall on the west boundary were demolished. Argo Reserve was officially opened the 3 August 1978.

[1] Betty Malone, *Bonds of Care: Elizabeth Fry Retreat and its Founders*.

[2] *Prahran Telegraph*, 25 April, 1914, p.7

[3] MMBW Property Service Plan No.7361.

[4] Malone, *op. cit.* p. 86.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 88.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Argus*, 21 March, 1933, p.3.

[9] *Ibid.*, p.10.

[10] Malone, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 109.

[12] www.findandconnect.gov.au/vic/biogs/E000828b.htm#related

[13] Malone, *op. cit.* p. 110.

Description

Physical Description

Argo Reserve is a small public park in South Yarra bordered by Argo Street to the south and Albion Street to the north. A building which originally formed part of the Elizabeth Fry Retreat laundry survives at the northern end of the reserve. Historical records are ambiguous with respect to the building's construction date. It could have been built in 1930, when laundry facilities were upgraded, or 1933, when entirely new laundry buildings were erected.

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The former laundry has red-brick walls and corrugated iron roof with a projecting gabled bay on the south side. The gable end contains a loft door and is embellished with bold rendered ornament (detailed to match the original 1914 building). The building is otherwise devoid of decorative ornament. Small steel-framed windows set high in the walls point to the building's original utilitarian purpose.

The building appears to remain substantially intact externally notwithstanding the demolition of adjoining side wings. The roof has modern corrugated steel cladding, a timber pergola has been erected on the east side of the building and the rear (north) wall has brick extensions with a curved profile. A foundation stone on the south elevation was presumably salvaged from the demolished 1914 main building. It reads:

THIS STONE WAS LAID BY DONNALD MACKINNON MLA OCTOBER 8TH 1913
THE ELIZABETH FRY RETREAT FOUNDED BY THE LATE MRS SARAH J SWINBORN.

A red-brick wall on the west boundary of Argo Reserve is presumably a remnant of the Elizabeth Fry laundry complex and may also have formed part of the 1933 boundary wall.

Comparative Analysis

The former Elizabeth Fry Retreat is a rare example in the City of Stonnington of a building associated with a women's refuge or similar institution. The Convent of Good Shepherd in Chadstone was established in 1883 and performed a broadly similar role as a training centre for troubled girls, but it was entirely demolished to make way for Chadstone shopping centre. The Salvation Army operated an industrial school for girls at 'Belgrave', a large double-storey Victorian villa at 1295 Dandenong Road, Malvern East. The villa is still standing but its architectural character is domestic rather than institutional. The former Elizabeth Fry Retreat laundry is better illustrative of its original purpose. Two other sites in Stonnington related to the local historical theme of neglected children and 'fallen' women were demolished in the 1990s - i.e. the Try Boy's Society Hall in Surrey Road, South Yarra and the Methodist Babies Home, Copeland Street, Malvern.

Statement of Significance

Relevant themes from the City of Stonnington Environmental History are indicated by TEH.

What is Significant?

The Elizabeth Fry Retreat was established by a family of Quakers in 1885 on land now occupied by Argo Reserve. The Retreat began as refuge and training centre for female ex-prisoners and was initially housed in a converted nineteenth century villa. This was replaced in 1914 by a substantial double-storey brick building, designed by architect J V T Ward. Inmates were put to work in a commercial laundry which provided the Retreat with a major source of income. The laundry was upgraded and rebuilt in the early 1930s. In the post war years, the Retreat operated as a hostel for wayward girls.

The site was turned into a public park in the late 1970s when all of the Elizabeth Fry Retreat buildings were demolished other than a boundary wall and part of the 1930s laundry complex. The surviving laundry building is a small red-brick structure with a distinctive rendered parapet treatment on its south facing gable end.

Elements that contribute to the significance of the place include (but are not limited to):

- The original external form, materials and detailing of the building
- The unpainted red-brick surfaces.
- The 1913 foundation stone.

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- The legibility of the built form provided by the open parkland setting.
- The red-brick fence/wall on the west boundary of the site.
- The absence of modern signage on and around the building (other than interpretative signage).

Modern additions including the roof cladding, pergola and brick paving and garden retaining walls not significant.

How is it significant?

The former Elizabeth Fry Retreat laundry is of local historical and architectural significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

Historically, the former Elizabeth Fry Retreat laundry is significant for its associations with the early history of welfare services in Stonnington and the role of religious and charitable groups in the provision of these services (10.3.1 Neglected children and 'fallen' women, Criterion G). The laundry attests to the nature of work performed by inmates of the Retreat, and more generally provides rare evidence in Stonnington of early twentieth century approaches to the institutional care, reform and training of disadvantaged women and girls (Criterion A & B).

The former Elizabeth Fry Retreat Laundry is architecturally significant as a utilitarian institutional building made distinctive by its prominent gable end treatment (Criterion D & E). The brick wall on the reserve's west boundary provides tangible evidence of the scale of the Retreat complex and its insular nature.

Recommendations 2013

External Paint Controls

No

Internal Alteration Controls

No

Tree Controls

No

Fences & Outbuildings

No

Prohibited Uses May Be Permitted

No

Incorporated Plan

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Aboriginal Heritage Place

No

Other Recommendations

The extent of the heritage overlay should include the red-brick west boundary wall and a curtilage of 5 metres of land around the east, west and south sides of the former laundry.

This information is provided for guidance only and does not supersede official documents, particularly the planning scheme. Planning controls should be verified by checking the relevant municipal planning scheme.