
Alton House & Garden



B4137 Alton



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Location

239 Alton Road, MOUNT MACEDON VIC 3441 - Property No B4137

Municipality

MACEDON RANGES SHIRE

Level of significance

State

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H0874

Heritage Listing

National Trust

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - August 9, 2005

House classification:

The residence at Alton - is one of the most innovative examples of a late nineteenth century picturesque medieval style building in Australia (especially in its use of hung wall tiles and its unity of design over its development period); - is notable in that its owner acted as designer for the residence, but may have been assisted and guided by W W Wardell; - is enhanced in significance by the owner/designer's wide interests and influential friends; - is significant for its originality as a house carefully adapted to different needs over a long period.

Significant aspects of the property include outbuildings and other structures such as farm buildings, horticultural

buildings, cottages, garden structures and stables.

House Classified: 13/02/1991

File note: 08/04 2011: G13100 (Alton Garden) amalgamated & filed with B4137.

Garden classification:

Historical: Alton - has significant associations with prominent nineteenth century 'gentlemen scientists'; - is located in the focus of a small area developed by some of the founders of Victoria's educational and scientific institutions as well as important nineteenth century public figures; - was occupied by noted families during the twentieth century; - demonstrates a significant past lifestyle. Buildings: The residence at Alton is of National significance - as one of the most innovative examples of a late nineteenth century picturesque medieval style building in Australia (especially its use of hung wall tiles and its unity of design over its development period; - for its retention of an original and significant nineteenth century interior; - notable in that its owner acted as designer for the residence, possibly guided by W W Wardell; - enhanced in significance by the owner/designer's wide interests and influential friends; - significant for its intactness as a house carefully adapted to different needs over a long period. Significant aspects of the property include outbuildings and other structures such as farm buildings, horticultural buildings, cottages, garden structures and stables. Gardens: The garden at Alton is of National significance - as one of the finest Hill Station properties in Australia (typical characteristics include an elevated location, steeply terraced gardens with unusual exotic cool-temperate planting and picturesque buildings); - for its collection of trees, which includes many rare species, particularly conifers; possibly representing one of the best such collections in Australia; - for the terracing and structure of the garden (including structural elements associated with George Nicholas). This includes the integration of the natural topography and planting both within and outside the property. - for its association with nurseryman and garden designer, William Sangster, of the noted firm Taylor and Sangster. Due to loss by fire and subdivision this property forms an integral part of the best remaining precinct of Mount Macedon's renowned collection of gardens. HISTORY Alton Road The first section of Alton Road was created by 1871 when land was selected in this vicinity. Sir George Verdon and others visited the locality early in 1874 and many blocks were selected under Section 49 of the Land Act 1869.(1) Writing in 1895, Gisborne Gazette correspondent 'Wanderer' recalled the visit. Mr Reid [sic], the architect, Mr Ellery, the Government astronomer, Mr Foord, of the Melbourne Mint and Sir George Verdon, having heard that land was available for selection, came to the Mount ... The land is good but extremely friable, requiring a great deal of water, which is plentifully supplied from a spring on the higher ground. Sir George and his neighbours set to work at once and clearing was commenced, care being taken to preserve, as far as possible, the indigenous shrubs, for Sir George is a perfect enthusiast for everything Australia.(2) Special conditions meant a maximum of 10 acres could be selected and a special planting condition stipulated that The licensee shall ... plant upon each and every acre of land ... at least ten (10) useful timber trees of the following kinds, viz. Cedrus deodara, Pines of all kinds and Wellingtonia giganteas and shall foster the growth of such trees in accordance with any code of instructions that may be promulgated by the Board of Land and Works.(3) Many of the blocks thus selected were later put up for auction with a valuation for improvements and the results of this sale process were shown on a composite plan of special allotments, lithographed by the Department of Lands and Survey in April 1876. A 48 acre forest nursery was established at the summit of Alton Road in the 1870s, apparently for the experimental culture of Deodar Cedars, Himalayan Spruce, Silver Firs and several species of European timbers. Alton Road rapidly became a mecca for gentlemen scientists of the Colony. Apart from Verdon other selectors in Alton Road included Robert Ellery, Joseph Reed, William Guilfoyle, E J Nansen, John Elkington, Herbert Strong and Emily McCoy (daughter of Frederick McCoy). Much prestige was given to Alton Road in 1885 when David Syme sold his property for use as a summer cottage for the Governor of Victoria. Three other properties in Alton Road are worthy of note. Allotment 18 purchased in 1876 by A D Hodgson and civil engineer Edward Hindmarsh Bawden erected his residence Bungl'hi on the site in 1901. Bawden is remembered today as the engineer for Bawden Road which was opened in 1908 from Upper Macedon to Woodend. Further north, Marnarnie was the country residence of Sir Isaac Isaacs, who was later Chief Justice of the Australian High Court and Governor-General. Garden and Grounds Sir George Verdon had returned from England in May 1872 to become General Manager of the English Scottish & Australian Bank.(4) He first made enquiries regarding land selection at Mount Macedon in December 1874 and on 4 February 1874 applied for a license to occupy 18 acres 0 roods 35 perches. This exceeded the stipulated 10 acre limit but Verdon was able to argue that the extra 8 acres would have constituted a landlocked allotment unable to be selected. Correspondence by Verdon with the Department of Land & Survey included a 'Memorandum of improvements made by the undersigned [Sir George Verdon] upon selection on Mount Macedon'. This was dated 24 August 1874 and formed part of a request by Verdon to put his selection up for auction. 1. The land is enclosed with a post and rail and twin fence. 2. All the standing dead trees - about 200 - some of them of great size have been felled and many of them burnt off. 3. Large portions of the ground have been completely cleared of logs and stumps and are ploughed and trenched. 4. Pathways to the extent of half a

mile have been cut, cleared and formed. 5. 250 forest trees of the kind specified in the Regulations have been planted, and an orchard has been planted with the most suitable fruit trees. 6. 600 ornamental trees and shrubs are in the ground to be planted [by] next year. 7. A small hut has been erected. The most revealing aspect is a reference to a contract with Taylor and Sangster, presumably for the supply of plants although their services may have been more wide ranging. At this date they were operating their nursery from Toorak although in January 1875 their land selection at Mount Macedon was approved by the Board of Land & Works. In January 1875 a bushfire slightly damaged Verdon's selection, destroying 20 chains of paling fencing and 80 fruit trees. 'Wanderer' commented that 'Although depressed by the misfortune ... [Sir George Verdon] again set to work to improve his little estate, and in this Sir George says he was greatly helped by Mr A Turner of the Mount'.(5) Verdon finally purchased his allotment on 2 February 1875. Alfred Turner apparently served his apprenticeship with Taylor and Sangster and superintended the garden at Alton until Verdon's death in 1896. 'Wanderer', correspondent for the Gisborne Gazette visited Alton in 1895 and included useful comments on Sir George Verdon's garden philosophy and planting. Though cultivated holdings are the rule, rather than the exception, upon the Mount, there is one respect in which the holder of Alton estate differs from many of his neighbours - that is, that he does not aim at establishing a metropolitan garden in the midst of the forest. His idea is rather to bring his garden more into harmony with the surroundings of the mountain. In the words of Pope, he would 'In all let nature never be forgot, But treat the goddess like a modest fair, Nor ever dress nor leave her wholly bare.'(6) Sir George Verdon died on 13 September 1896 and Alton was sold to Justice J H Hood. The property passed to Richard Selmon Whiting and in 1929 it was sold to George Richard Rich Nicholas. Nicholas apparently went overseas in 1933 and married in 1936. This period also coincided with the creation of the tennis court and other structural works to the garden. Nicholas died on 21 September 1960 and the property remained in family ownership until 1990.

Residence Probable sequence of construction. 1874 Weatherboard hut, reference in 1875 ratebook as 'offices', thought to include Areas 1, 2 and possibly 3 (see numbering on the accompanying plan).(7) 1878 First described as 'villa' in ratebooks, includes Areas 3 (entry) and 4 (dining). The front door and side windows date from this period and the hung tiles on the right hand side of the front door match those shown on a c.1878 photograph. Areas 5, 6, 7 and 8 would also date from this period as indicated by roof form. At this stage the roof has a steeply pitched hip (but not the existing mansard) with a dormer attic window at the rear. No attic windows appear on the front elevation. It is possible Area 9 (kitchen) and Area 20 (external coolroom) may also date from this stage.(8) c.1882 According to 'Hortensis' at least Area 12 (drawingroom) was added at this stage. The residence probably also included the bedroom wing, (Areas 13, 14, 15 and 16) and the lavatory wing (Area 17). A photograph apparently around this date shows this section in a newly completed form. In an 1886 view the c.1878 roof (without dormers) appears to be still extant in combination with the c.1882 works.(9) 1896 Photographs show second storey mansard and dormers completed (Areas 23-24). The mansard section does not appear to show in an 1886 Australasian Sketcher view. Area 18 (billiard room) was presumably built by this period. Area 19 (library) is constructed of brick (unlike any other portion of the main house) and includes Verdon's crest in a window which presumably places this area within George Verdon's ownership.

DESCRIPTION RESIDENCE Exterior The building form of Alton betrays many building campaigns. The original cottage still forms the main entry although an upper storey has been added, its bulk disguised by a mansard roof. To the left of the original section the drawing room forms a prominent feature with a large square bay window projecting from beneath a decorated gable roof. The overall building form is balanced by a projected wing of bedrooms to the west and architecturally the various sections are unified by the use of hung terracotta tiles as a wall cladding. To the rear of the main building are a large kitchen and billiard room/library. Alton is set on a steep site with a deep cutting to the rear of the residence and a raised earthen platform to the south front. Bevelled picture windows have been inserted in the Areas 1, 4 and 12 (drawing room bay). The verandah has simple late Edwardian brackets in lieu of the original strutted brackets and the entrance gablet has been removed. The tiles above ground floor level including the mansard roof have been replaced by asbestos cement shingles and a gutter established between the main roof and mansard section. The large flagpole and iron quatrefoil support have been removed from the drawing room roof. Finials have been removed from front dormer windows. Bullnosed brick steps replaced the original basalt steps; the latter appear to have been relocated above the pond. Also the enclosure of Area 11 appears to date from this period, if not earlier. Interior The interior is lined virtually throughout with beaded edged Baltic pine lining boards, generally varnished but painted in bedrooms and bathrooms. Dado panels in Areas 1, 3, 4 and 12 feature select timbers, as does door and architrave joinery. The exaggerated stopped chamfer door styles and rails are of particular interest and may relate to the work of Wardell. This detail forms a theme for architraves throughout the house. Ceiling panelling in the diningroom is significant and the drawing room features a gothic ceiling detail of a strongly ecclesiastic character. Fire place overmantles and other details are of a commensurately elaborate character with motifs including Verdon's crest. Painted inscriptions in a 'medieval style' and room names are a feature of openings and architraves. Fanlights to drawing room windows, manufactured by S Belham and Co of London, feature inscriptions such as 'Aut bello aut pace Victoria' and 'Advance Australia'. (Verdon moved a motion advocating federation of the colonies at the 1863 Intercolonial conference. This is one of

the earliest known proposals for federation). Another leaded glass panel features the 'hung sheep' which was a motif of the ES&A, the bank Sir George managed after his return to Australia in 1872. Some other points of interest of the interior include the bathroom and toilet wing, originally only connected by a covered way with the passage; it retains original lining board partitions and terracotta tile floor, with 1920s plumbing fixtures and new toilets. The billiard room, is of special architectural interest, not only for its lantern roof form, but also because of the restrained stencil work on the varnished boards, especially at dado level.

GARDEN The garden and grounds comprise the following major elements: - entrance drive - terraced lawns and tennis court - terraced garden - forest - woodland - wild garden - farm area These areas include a wide range of trees and other plants of considerable interest. The planting was commenced in 1874 following the specific requirements of the Section 49 license which governed Verdon's selection. (Refer to the History for details of these requirements).

The Entrance Drive This was designed to provide a concealed approach with a controlled vista to the croquet pavilion. The stone gate posts with their chrome plated repoussed script name plate, iron gates and lamps are focal elements and relate to the Nicholas ownership. The 1983 fire destroyed some important elements - the northern hedge and part of the croquet court surrounds; the 'enclosed' character of the drive has thus been substantially altered.

Terraced Lawns & Tennis Court This is a largely open area. The trees and shrubs are of a restricted scale allowing vistas of and outlooks from the house. The later golden elm outside the drawing room departs from this concept. The area is terraced with banked lawns, stone retaining walls, steps and paths which are emphasised with dwarf lights. The house platform dates from the initial stages of the house in the 1870s. However, the stone landscape structures generally date from the Nicholas period and provide the dominant character. The tennis court and surrounds is the strongest element and is notable for its lavish detailing and facilities. However the stone croquet pavilion and its surrounds are the most significant landscape works of this period. This pavilion is assumed to be in the approximate location of Verdon's summerhouse.

Terraced Garden This area is the most interesting aspect of the garden. It most successfully combines the landscape design of Verdon with the later work of George Nicholas. It comprises a large number of mature trees including many conifers. The large trees are either carefully arranged to provide a confined vista across the Gisborne plains front the house or are grouped in clusters. The denseness of the planting contrasts with predominant areas of shrubs elsewhere. The area is also remarkable for the terraced retaining walls, paths and steps. These structures all appear to be the work of Nicholas but may be based on earlier work of Verdon. The pond and spring from the Verdon period survive although the external walls of the pond and bridge are by Nicholas (as indicated by the concrete bridge and tubular metal posts). The cherry walk dates from the Nicholas period. The planting principally comprises *Sequoiadendron giganteum* (Giant Redwood), *Pseudotsuga menziesii* (Douglas Fir) and other large conifers and other trees. Numerous tree ferns survive above the pond area; *Cordyline australis* and fan palms are also found in this area which provide a distinct nineteenth century character. There are also old plantings of rhododendrons. Much planting, however, would appear to date from the 1930s, especially the shrubs such as the extensive areas of mollis azaleas and the hydrangeas above the pond. The character of this area has substantially changed as a result of the 1983 fire - a number of trees were destroyed by spot fires and the shrubbery appears to have been burnt out in places giving rise to inappropriate regrowth.

Wild Garden This area to the east of the pond has been severely damaged by the fire. Prior to this it formed a dense backdrop of tree ferns and trees to the pond and the south of the croquet lawn. It is now relatively open and the road is now clearly visible in places. This area still retains a number of trees, tree ferns and ground cover plantings.

Forest Now a relatively impenetrable area it represents the type of planting envisaged by the Land Act requirements with the cool climate exotic planting integrated with some original forest trees. It comprises a significant area abutting Alton Road and thus extends the character of the property. The corner boundary is defined by several huge sequoias. A number of trees have been fire damaged or totally destroyed although a large part of the original planting has survived.

Woodland This comprises an area with large numbers of early or original plantings of sequoias and other similar species. It is relatively dense at the southern end and includes a boundary plantation of Douglas Fir which is several trees deep on the state forest boundary and a single row on the original northern boundary of Alton. It becomes an open paddock at the northern area and thus blends into the farm area. A path, which is an offshoot of the zig zag terraced paths, extends through this area in a wider carriage width configuration. This then continues as an oak avenue into the cow paddock. The dense planting of tall conifers around the house provides an important backdrop to the house when viewed from the front. As this area is higher than the house, this area also provides an impressive vista across the roof over the Gisborne plains.

Farm Area The area comprises the following major elements: - cow paddocks and dairy - glass houses, vegetable and fruit garden - gardener's house and sheds - horse paddock and stables.

ANALYSIS Residence Alton represents a fine example of the genre of picturesque medieval style buildings in Australia. By this, the building should not be compared with early nineteenth century buildings of the 'Colonial Gothick' as found in Sydney. Rather, it is a product of ideas espoused by Pugin and Ruskin, such as honesty in construction and truth in the use of materials. In its staged construction it evokes medieval building campaigns. As well, the owner Sir George Verdon, according to 'Hortensis' (William Sangster), 'has been his own architect'.(10) With regard to the property, Dr Miles Lewis has commented: The name Alton

itself reflects Verdon's family connections with the estate of Lord Shrewsbury, patron of Pugin. Verdon became honorary president of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, and himself owned a set of Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire Raisonné* in which respect he was a jump ahead of most local architects. He commissioned the Collins Street banking offices and private palazzo on a scale that gave rise to concerns in London ... [If] Verdon was his own architect, he would certainly have been helped, and by whom more probably than by Wardell? ... In architectural terms the building is at one level unique, and should be accepted as such.(11) The use of hung wall tiles, thought to date from c.1882 is an early use of this material in Victoria and possibly Australia. Architects Oakden Addison & Kemp claimed in 1889 that their use of this material at Dr Rowan's residence (close to Alton at Mount Macedon) was 'here used in an extensive manner for the first time in the colony'.(12) In light of the earlier use at Alton this claim appears somewhat exaggerated. The choice of terracotta wall tiles is thought to have been prompted by their light-weight nature and the difficulty of access to the steep Mount Macedon site (at least this was the claim made by Oakden Addison & Kemp in relation to Dr Rowan's residence). With regard to the wall tiles, Dr Lewis has commented: The tile hanging is undoubtedly early for Australia. The first prominent example was Caerleon in Bellevue Hill, Sydney, in 1886, and this was by one of the trendiest English architects of the day, Maurice Adams. In Western Australia tile hanging was regarded as novel even in 1905.(13) Internally, the details fall midway between Charles Eastlake's advice contained in *Hints on Household Taste* (first published in 1868) and the Arts and Crafts movement of later decades. The Property as a Whole 1. Mount Macedon represents the most coherent collection of hill station properties in Australia and as such has been ranked as 'of world significance' by a major study undertaken to assess historic gardens in Victoria (Peter Watts, 1978). 2. Alton is one of a small number of mountain retreats in Australia that embody a terraced hill station character. The characteristics are generally steep and elevated terrain with an outlook over the valleys or plains; the extensive use of terracing to provide access and to facilitate the pursuit of horticulture. These features distinguish such gardens from the pastoral gardens also found at Mount Macedon which have a character not unique to Mount Macedon but which can be found in any hilly or undulating terrain. 3. Alton is a significant garden design still clearly reflecting Verdon's vision but has been overlaid with the Nicholas era terracing, paths and garden structures. The garden provides an important balance between landscaped areas, extensive working areas and paddocks and the natural bush setting. 4. The garden contains a range of plants including many of an unusual character. Dr J H Willis has described Alton as having 'the best private collection of large conifers anywhere in Victoria', as well as being of great interest for the many other genus represented. 'Aesthetically and as a rich horticultural resource its importance to Victoria is undeniable'.(14) 5. The integrity of the grounds of Alton is extraordinarily high by Mount Macedon standards, being only rivalled by Durrol. This has been due to the relatively few owners and the long ownership by the Nicholas family. George Nicholas was responsible for its substantial restructuring in the 1930s which respected many of the original features. The garden suffered minor damage in the 1983 fires although there was massive damage to the approach along Alton Road and to surrounding forests. At this date many other Mount Macedon gardens were either totally or partially destroyed. The terraced hill station gardens were often associated with Indian settlements such as Darjeeling and Simla, particularly in the nineteenth century. 6. The property is of particular historical and design interest because it was established by a 'gentlemen scientist'; i.e. someone prominent in intellectual society as well as the public domain. This provides an important link with other properties in Alton Road which formed a unique enclave at the period of its settlement. Subsequent owners have also been of note, in particular the Nicholas family who have been prominent in Australian commerce and industry. 7. The picturesque medieval character of Alton may reflect the intellectual influence of writers such as Pugin and Ruskin. It is also an important Australian example of the Arts and Crafts movement. The house at Alton is of special note on account of its design, materials (especially the hung tiles) and finishes which make it unique to this state. Many other Mount Macedon properties lack this attribute. 8. The house at Alton is one of the most intact properties of the style and period in Australia. Durrol is probably the only other house at Mount Macedon of comparable intactness. 9. The garden is one of a small number at Mount Macedon which has a very strong relationship with the natural topography and vegetation. 10. In conjunction with Hascombe and Penola the garden at Alton forms an ensemble that is not now found elsewhere at Mount Macedon. This is due to their confined location, the proximity of the springs, the character of the road that serves them and their harmonious relationship with the road. EXISTING DESIGNATIONS National Trust of Australia (Victoria): Listed on the Register of Significant Trees of Victoria are *Abies nordmanniana* (Caucasian Fir) *Picea orientalis* (Oriental Spruce) *Laurus azorica* (Canary Island Bay) *Cedrus deodara* (Deodar) *Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula' (Weeping Beech) *Castanea sativa* (Sweet Chestnut) *Pseudotsuga menziesii* (Douglas Fir) *Fagus sylvatica* (European Beech) *Magnolia campbellii*. Part of the Mt Macedon Gardens Classification. Garden classifid: 09/05/1980

Hermes Number 68806

Property Number

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.

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