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# ROBERTSON'S HOMESTEAD SITE

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## Location

100 FARR PARKWAY, KEILOR NORTH

## Municipality

## Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

## Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7822-2430

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - October 5, 2023

### What is significant?

The bluestone building, known as Robertson's Homestead, is significant, as are associated archaeological deposits. The homestead is an example of early European settlement construction and domestic use. The building is relatively intact and in good condition, however, some renovations and alterations have occurred to the building throughout the 20th century. These alterations have affected the original architectural integrity of the building. Archaeological deposits, such as rubbish pits, cisterns, outbuildings, potential buried historical surfaces, and other features, such as structural foundations are also significant as they are associated with 19th century and early 20th century domestic, pastoral, and agricultural land use of Robertson's Homestead. Archaeological deposits are likely to be relatively intact and in good condition as the land use of Sydenham Park remains largely undeveloped.

### How is it significant?

Robertson's Homestead is of historical, archaeological (scientific), and aesthetic significance.

### Why is it significant?

Robertson's Homestead is of historical, archaeological (scientific), and aesthetic significance as it is an example of early European settlement of the western plains of Victoria, and contains archaeological deposits associated with the 19th century and early 20th century occupation of the region. This archaeological evidence has the potential to provide insight into the regional social and economic development of the western plains, while the bluestone building, known as Robertson's Homestead, provides insight into architectural development during the early settlement of Victoria.

Interpretation  
of Site

Robertson's Homestead is situated in Sydenham Park, which is a reserve located in Keilor North. The land is zoned as Public Park and Recreation. Robertson's Homestead is vacant and is not currently accessible to the public with temporary perimeter fencing erected around the bluestone building. The bluestone building remains relatively intact with all four foundational walls still erect. However, some cracking and separation of mortar is apparent and has been recently repaired, particularly on three of the four walls. The three chimney stacks remain intact apart from the corbel top of the north-west chimney. Two metal plates each on the north and south facing walls have also been inserted to stabilise the movement of the walls. A timber verandah with a tile roof is attached to the eastern face of the building. The timber piles and tile roofing are the result of recent repairs to the verandah. The verandah itself does not appear to be original to the building as it has been attached through metal spikes and fixtures, hammered into the mortar post building construction. Similarly, on the western face of the building metal spikes have been hammered into the mortar, with remnants of metal sheeting attached; however, the verandah once attached to the western face has been entirely removed. With the exception of the windows on the western wall, all glazing has been broken or removed. Window frames are double hung sashes and are probably not original. The door in the western wall, which would have served as the 'backdoor', has also been removed. The inside of Robertson's Homestead has undergone several renovations over the course of the 20th century. Different layers of paint on the walls and multiple layers of flooring, including carpet and linoleum flooring over hardwood timber, are evidence of various alterations to the interior of the building. The chimney in the north-east corner of the building has been plastered over, while the chimneys in the south-east and north-west have been rebricked and painted. The chimney in the north-west contains an iron Lux wood burning oven. More recent late 20th century additions to the homestead include the installation of a new kitchen with 1980s style cabinets, a sink, and an electric stovetop oven. As well as light fixtures, power points and tv aerial sockets. The original wall between the hall and original kitchen (north west room) has been removed, and new timber stud walls inserted which appear to have been used as a bathroom and laundry. A cement lined brick cistern is located to the north-west of the homestead. Potential archaeological deposits and features were identified at Robertson's Homestead and in the surrounding areas of Sydenham Park. Cavities in the flooring in some of the rooms provided the opportunity to examine subfloor deposits beneath the homestead. While much of the debris visible was building rubble and mid-late 20th century domestic rubbish, such as hairbrushes, early 20th century artefacts were also identified. These artefacts included discarded animal bone in the subfloor beneath the iron oven, as well as ceramic fragments and a highly degraded metal case. Mid-late 20th century alcohol bottles were also located in the subfloor in the adjacent room on the north-east side of the building. The foundations of two other potential bluestone structures were located during an archaeological survey to the north-east of Robertson's Homestead, in closer proximity to Jackson's Creek. Artefactual materials were also located in association with both these structures, as well as sporadically spread across the surface of the plain overlooking Jackson's Creek. At the south of foundations located near a peppercorn tree and small quarry to the north-east of the homestead, glass bottles, ceramics and porcelain were found on a low mound, potentially indicating the presence of a rubbish pit. This area contains the highest density of finds with visible diagnostic features identified within the study area. Given that this location was also marked on a 1930s army survey map as a structure, this suggests that the deposit dates to at least the early 20th century. Of the diagnostic artefacts located, the manufacture type and decoration styles further suggest that this deposit dates to the 19th century. Two ceramic fragments, one of which demonstrates the use of blue transferware, which was popularly used on dinnerware during the 19th century. A hand painted porcelain jug handle was also located, and the bottom of a mouth blown dark green glass bottle with a pontil mark and handwritten inscription of a lower case "m" and "2", which gives the bottle a manufacture date of the 19th century. A light green glass bottle top with a lengthened double collar finish appears to be a salad oil bottle top dating around the late 19th century – early 20th century.

Hermes  
Number

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## History

James Robertson Senior (Snr) arrived in Australia from Scotland with his family in February 1841. His sons, James Robertson junior (Jnr) and Francis Robertson would later become prominent members of the new European settlement in Melbourne. James Robertson (Jnr) taking over his father's pastoral lease in Keilor, upon his father's death in 1853. Meanwhile Francis Robertson set his sights on political aspirations, holding a seat in parliament in the northern and north west electorates from 1860, until his death in 1886. Upon settling in "Upper Keilor" ('Death of Mr James Robertson', 1895), James Robertson (Snr) utilised his pastoral run for sheep grazing, like many early squatters to the western plains. In the 1840s, land records listed James Robertson as leasing 5,760 acres in the Parish of Maribyrnong. As freehold land became available, Robertson purchased sections of land along the Bendigo Road (Calder Highway), including most of his prior lease, amassing approximately 4000 acres of land in Maribyrnong Parish (Vines 1993). In 1849, Robertson appeared as a witness in a murder trial when the farm hand he hired turned up dead on the banks of Jacksons Creek (The Argus 1849). James Robertson (Snr) had hired John Kane to mind the sheep on his property and had been Kane's employer for the preceding five years. When Robertson had returned to his station and found Kane missing, he enquired with Kane's wife as to his whereabouts. After a couple of days, he began searching around Kane's hut and the nearby Creek. It was during this search he located ashes approximately 30 yards from the hut with evidence of Kane's belongings and human remains (The Argus 1849). Kane's wife and her suspected lover were accused of the Kane's death, with Robertson becoming a key witness at their trial. John Kane was not the only death known to have occurred at "Upper Keilor". In 1896, a body was found under a burning tree in one of Robertson's paddock (The Herald 1896). This death was of an unknown man and ruled an accident. It was believed the man lit a fire under a tree, and once the man was asleep, the tree appears to have fallen on him and burned him, with him suffocating to death on the smoke (The Herald 1896). The two earliest recorded structures on Robertson's holdings are the Robertson Arms and a police station, with these structures appearing on an 1854 Parish map. The remains of the Robertson Arms are currently listed on the Victorian Heritage Inventory under the Galloway Arms (H7822-2270), which the hotel was later renamed. In 1853, Edward Phillip Rainey applied for a licence for a house at Upper Keilor to be called the Robertson Arms, however, the licence was denied as the premise was unfinished (Victorian Heritage Database 2023). The hotel was licenced by 1854 and would become known as the Galloway Arms (H7822-2270), which consisted of 12 rooms, two stables and a detached cottage, of later construction, with five rooms (Victorian Heritage Database 2023). "Upper Keilor" was said to be just one of James Robertson's (Snr) land holdings, and on his death in 1853, his land holdings were granted to his eldest son, James Robertson ('1/175 James Robertson: Will; Grant of Probate', 1853). James Robertson's (Snr) wife and sister in law were granted use of the dwelling house at Upper Keilor, while his other land and properties were divided up amongst his sons ('1/175 James Robertson: Will; Grant of Probate', 1853). James Robertson (Snr) bequeathed Section Eighteen in the Parish of Maribyrnong of Upper Keilor, as well as his farms in the Parish of Dutta Galla to his son, Francis Robertson. In 1864, Robertson (Jnr) was already retired and was living on the "Upper Keilor" property that his father established ('A Ramble in the Keilor District', 1864). In an interview he gave to the Farmer's Journal, Robertson revealed that there was no cultivation on the property with the exception of a small orchard and garden. At the time of the interview, Robertson's land holdings were known as "Upper Keilor Estate" and amounted to approximately 3000 acres. Vines (1993) concluded that by the 1890s the Robertson estate totalled 4000 acres, suggesting that Robertson (Jnr) acquired at least 1000 acres following his father's death. The Farmer's Journal described the land as being entirely enclosed with 'suitable fences' made of local stone ('A Ramble in the Keilor District', 1864). Robertson ran approximately 3000 lambs on his land but his favourite stock were his shorthorn cattle, of which he was trying his hand at breeding to produce high quality meat. The Journal also interviewed Mr Turner who leased approximately 120 acres of land from James Robertson ('A Ramble in the Keilor District', 1864). Mr Turner utilised the land along the creek for cultivation, his crops included potatoes, carrots, chicory and mangelwurzels. Wheat and barley were also cultivated along the creek flats, while horses and cattle grazed the remainder of the lease ('A Ramble in the Keilor District', 1864). Following his father's death, James Robertson became an active member of his community and contributed to the development of the western region of Victoria. He had a seat on the local Keilor Shire Council for 20 years ('Death of Mr James Robertson', 1895). He was also on the Keilor District Roads Board, and played a vital role in commissioning the construction of the Maribyrnong River Bridge at Keilor in 1868 (State Library of Victoria 1914). For recreation, James Robertson often held rabbit coursing events, running dogs to hunt rabbits across his Upper

Keilor property near Keilor Road ('Keilor', 1878). He was the president of the Aberfeldie Coursing Association which had 200 members in 1878 and appears to be named after the Scottish town from which the Robertsons hailed ('Aberfeldie Coursing Association', 1878). James Robertson (Jnr) died in 1895 and was survived by his wife and eight children ('Death of Mr James Robertson', 1895). At the time of his death, James Robertson (Jnr) had acquired a number of land holdings in addition to Upper Keilor. He was said to be living at his property, known as the "Grange", on St Kilda Rd in the City of Melbourne ('James Robertson Will and Probate', 1895). His will states that Upper Keilor consisted of 4000 acres, with a stone dwelling house that was 23 years old and contained six rooms, as well as three stalled stables, a wool sheading, and outbuildings, and was left to his son, Malcolm Robertson ('James Robertson Will and Probate', 1895). Title documents from the conversion to Torrens indicate that following James Robertson's death in 1895, Malcolm Robertson shared ownership of the Upper Keilor Estate with Coiler McCracken and Alexander Oliver, until they transferred ownership to John Black McArthur in 1915. Malcolm Robertson was listed as a grazier, Coiler McCracken was a prominent Melbourne businessman and second captain of the Essendon Football Club, and Alexander Oliver was listed as a stock and share broker. As Malcolm Robertson was also listed as living on Jandra Station near New South Wales, and his proprietor partners were not graziers or pastoralists, it's likely that Robertson's Homestead was being leased at this time. From 1907, Malcolm Robertson and his partners began selling off parts of his late father's estate, with the extent of Sydenham Park including Robertson Homestead being sold to John Bakewell McArthur. The property proceeded to pass through a number of owners with various occupations over the course of the 20th century. Some of the landowners were well known, such as John McArthur, who was the first owner to sell the land to the municipality to be used as a recreation reserve. A range of landowners were primary producers, and likely utilised the land for stock grazing. The only proprietor recorded as living at Sydenham Park was Robert Watson, between 1946 and 1950. From the 1950s, Sydenham Park was passed through a number of companies, one of note was the Albion Quarrying Company, which likely used the land for basalt quarrying. In 1982, the property was acquired by the Keilor Council and designated entirely as a recreation reserve, being its present use, as Sydenham Park.

*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.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*