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## High Street - Northcote Historic Area



B7210 Northcote Westside

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### Location

High Steet,, NORTHCOTE VIC 3070 - Property No B7210

### Municipality

DAREBIN CITY

### Level of significance

Regional

### Heritage Listing

National Trust

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### Statement of Significance

Last updated on - May 7, 2008

High Street at Northcote runs across the river flats north from Merri Creek and climbs the steep escarpment near Clarke Street on to and across Rucker's Hill. The first Government land sales in this area were in 1839, but the land south of Westgarth Street was retained in Crown ownership as part of Melbourne's township reserve. In 1842 High Street was proclaimed as a narrow government road running north from this crown reserve through the privately owned allotments on Rucker's Hill towards the Plenty River district. In 1852 Robert Hoddle laid out the government township of Northcote on the Merri Creek flats, and laid out High Street through the new township as a three chain wide boulevard. By the 1860s however it was clear that the focus of settlement, rather than being on the flats, would be on the plateau at Upper Northcote. Here there were some small farms, cottages and small-scale industries, as well as substantial houses built to take advantage of the extensive views, and businesses were established to service these. Westgarth Street marks the separation between the gracious scale, elm avenues and residential character of Hoddle's 1852 boulevard, and the later speculative commercial development to the north.

The growth of Lower Northcote and Westgarth (at the base of the escarpment) on the flats remained slow during the nineteenth century. The 1860 bluestone Church of All Saints remains the most prominent building on the boulevard, which is now mainly occupied by detached late nineteenth and early twentieth century houses. Plantings of elms survive from 1885, as well as the 1905-7 median gardens and rockeries, and two obsolete guns that had protected the South Channel in Port Phillip Bay since 1887 which were placed there in 1913.

A new stone bridge with two huge brick arches over the Merri Creek was completed in 1875, and is one of Melbourne's finest riverine bridges. However Upper Northcote remained relatively isolated from the city, and its development slowed in the 1870s. The only access was via the steep and dangerous road up Rucker's Hill; the cable tram from the city terminated at Merri Creek, and even the horse bus service to Northcote had been cancelled at this time. Despite this the settlement grew rapidly in the 1880s, along with the rest of suburban Melbourne. The High Street shopping strip frontages began to be subdivided and redeveloped, and substantial commercial and civic buildings began to be built.

In 1888-1890 the cable tram route was continued from Clifton Hill to Upper Northcote. This required the building of an enormous ramp up the escarpment of Rucker's Hill, on an embankment supported by a bluestone wall, as well as the widening of the Merri Creek bridge. The embankment is topped with regularly spaced Peppercorn trees, and a fine granite drinking fountain is located at its base on the east side. A row of mature Elm trees planted at the base of the west abutment provides a tree canopy visible above the tramway ramp and complements the Peppercorns. The tramway ramp affords dramatic vistas towards the city, and to the hilltop church spires on each side of High Street.

The cable tram was a further stimulus to development of Upper Northcote. High Street developed the characteristic long shopping strip form associated with the cable tram routes. Most of the existing buildings in this part of High Street, including shops, banks, churches and civic buildings, date from between the 1880s and the collapse of the boom in 1891, and form a highly cohesive group. After the 1890s depression, and again after World War I, development picked up. The most significant building on the strip is the Northcote Theatre (1912), which is Victoria's earliest surviving purpose-built cinema. This section has always been the commercial, banking, and entertainment centre of Northcote. It retains its character as a Boom-era cable-tram route shopping strip, with some additional commercial development dating to 1940. The retail strip continued to develop further north of Separation Street following WWI, reaching the end of the cable tram line at the Plenty Road (Dundas Street) intersection by about 1940, creating a particularly long retail strip. This section is mainly single storey, dotted with interwar hotels, banks, and former cinemas and some later twentieth century large-area shops and car-yards. The 1.75 km thoroughfare of High Street, Northcote, between Merri Creek and Separation Street, includes the Merri Creek bridge, the 1852 Hoddle residential boulevard on the wide Merri Creek floodplain, the small and contained nineteenth and early twentieth century Westgarth shopping centre south of the escarpment, the 1888-90 cable tram ramp up Rucker's Hill escarpment, Northcote's religious and public buildings precinct on the city edge of the Rucker's Hill, and the nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial and retail development along the ridgeline of the Rucker's Hill plateau. The view of the city from the south edge of Rucker's Hill is one of Melbourne's major urban vistas.

How is it significant? The High Street, Northcote thoroughfare, including the Merri Creek bridge, is significant for aesthetic/architectural, historic, social, scientific/ technical reasons at a Regional level.

Why is it significant? High Street Northcote is historically significant as one of Melbourne's major nineteenth century thoroughfares, and for demonstrating important aspects of the planning of nineteenth century Melbourne. The change in the nature of High Street which occurs at Westgarth Street is historically significant for demonstrating the contrast between the government-planned land use and subdivision to the south, and the private development to the north. The residential character of the area close to Merri Creek is also significant, typifying the early development of Melbourne's sixty metre boulevards as gracious housing precincts. The long shopping strip along High Street is historically significant as a reflection of the importance of the cable tram routes in shaping Melbourne's commercial development. The section between Rucker's Hill and Separation Street is part of a remarkably long retail strip - at about 3 kms, it is the second longest continuous shopping strip in Melbourne. The 1885 elm plantings along the boulevard, and the medians and rockeries of 1904, embellished with guns from Port Phillip Bay, are historically and socially significant as markers of the entry to the Northcote municipal district for the last hundred years.

The section of High Street immediately north of Westgarth Street is architecturally significant for its consistent nineteenth and early twentieth century architectural scale and character, which is punctuated by two important interwar buildings, the 1921 Westgarth Theatre and former 1925 State Bank opposite.

The part of High Street at the southern end of the Rucker's Hill plateau is a prestigious elevated locale with extraordinary views over Melbourne. It is historically and socially significant as the seat of local government, the centre of police and community services, cultural activity and religious worship. It is architecturally and aesthetically significant as a collection of sophisticated buildings demonstrating various styles by notable architects. These include the richly decorated facades of George R. Johnson's Town Hall and the Carnegie Library by local architect Edward Twentymen Jnr., and the Victorian Public Works Department avant-garde

Elizabethan-style Police Station. These are enhanced by the surrounding skyline of prominent church spires including that of the Gothic revival Catholic Church, French Romanesque Presbyterian Church and the severe, almost brutal red brick Church of the Epiphany designed by Louis Williams, situated opposite on the highest point of Rucker's Hill.

The section of High Street on Rucker's Hill south of Separation Street is historically and socially significant as the commercial, banking, and entertainment centre of Northcote since its commencement as a small village centre during the mid 1850s. It retains its character as a Boom-era cable-tram route shopping strip with significant additional commercial development built up until 1940. It contains the former Northcote Theatre (1912), which is Victoria's oldest surviving purpose-built cinema, and some early buildings, including the bluestone Wesleyan schoolhouse (1854, rear elevation only intact), the Peacock Hotel (1854, altered) and the Wesleyan Church (1869). This section is architecturally and aesthetically significant for its dense and consistent streetscape scale, its classical commercial shop facades and banks, and the variety of buildings of various periods and styles from the 1860s to about 1940, including such moderne buildings as the late 1930s former Bank of New South Wales, 326-30 High Street. The concentration of important buildings on street corners is noteworthy, especially at Westbourne Grove, Bastings and Lawry Streets. Side street skyline vistas are important to the sense of High Streets elevated location on the plateau.

There are also two individual elements in this precinct of scientific/technological significance. The 1875 Malmsbury stone bridge, with two huge brick arches over the Merri Creek, is one of Melbourne finest riverine bridges. The 1888-90 tramway ramp built on the steep escarpment of Rucker's Hill is a very rare example of its type. It is technologically significant as an impressive work of nineteenth century engineering. It is also historically significant for demonstrating the great impact of suburban railway and cable tramway services on the expansion of Melbourne during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which enabled Northcote's rapid Boom era and pre-World War I growth. It is also historically significant as a remaining feature of what was the last cable tram route to continue in service in Melbourne.

Classified: 19/06/2004

Other Names        Epping Road (1842-1853), Plenty Road And Upper Plenty Road (1860s),.

Hermes Number    71356

Property Number

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## Physical Description 1

High Street runs north from the Merri Creek, through the suburbs of Westgarth and Northcote. It may be subdivided readily into two parts by the cable tram ramp: the southern section, comprising the Hoddle boulevard south of Westgarth Street, and the Westgarth shopping centre; and the north section consisting of the ramp up to Rucker's Hill and the civic and commercial strip on the hill. From the elevated (north) end of the ramp there are superb views across to the city of Melbourne, as well as views across the residential areas on both sides of High Street.

The wide Hoddle boulevard begins at the Merri Creek bridge, and runs north as far as Westgarth Street. Major features are the landscaping, including the cannons, and on the east side the All Saints Anglican Church. There are a number of Federation villas, and some later nondescript twentieth century intrusions, including blocks of flats and industrial buildings.

Individual buildings of importance in this historic area include:

The All Saints' Church (1859-60) at the corner of Walker Street is one of the more prominent Anglican Churches of the 1850s. The church is in the English Gothic style, and distinguished by the use of Bacchus Marsh freestone dressings on a body of squared snecked bluestone rubble.

The house Durham, 38 High Street, which was built in 1903 by Winifred Anderson. It is a large and early example of the typical house-type in Northcote. Apart from the bull-nose cast-iron verandah, 'ashlar' timber facing and double-fronted construction, the house was given further bays, one of which faces Cunningham Street and so

distinguishing it from similar buildings in Northcote.

42 High Street was built in c1882 by Henry Toennies. Toennies and his wife operated a dairy there until the sale of the premises to the grocer, John Scott, in 1885 as his private residence. The building is a double-fronted brick house with a hipped roof and a bull-nose roof verandah; cast-iron frieze-work is used on the verandah. Beside the house is a basalt pitched laneway which leads to an original stables and coach-house building at the rear, possibly connected to the Toennies' dairy.

The Westgarth shopping centre, between Westgarth Street and the cable tram ramp, is made up of an uninterrupted row of one and two storeyed shops, with the late Victorian, Federation and Inter-War periods well represented. The showpiece of the Westgarth part of High Street is the Westgarth Theatre, built in 1921. It is the oldest purpose-built cinema still operating in Melbourne, and is notable for its interior decoration, particularly the geometric detail of the entrance vestibule and stairs to the mezzanine section. It retains its Classical Free style facade with lead light signage and cast cement ornamentation.

The two storeyed brick building on the north-west corner of High and Union Street is also a prominent structure with picturesque parapet treatment marking the northern edge of the centre. Elsewhere, the shops, many of which are parapeted, form rows or single buildings, occasionally dominating the street corner which they overlook.

The Westgarth shopping centre survives with a high level of integrity, enhanced by the aesthetic values of many of its contributory buildings. Its identity in High Street is strengthened by the elms tree avenue of the old Northcote Township Area to the immediate south and by the High Street cable tram ramp to the north. Some shop fronts are intact, such as numbers 96, 84 and 60, though original verandahs have been removed. An early mail-box has been retained on the eastern footpath. The shops have changed significantly in recent years. Along with many other inner-suburban strips, many shops have been converted to cafes and trendy stores. Some modest public art works have been installed in the footpaths, similar to the sort of works seen in Brunswick Street.

The High Street ramp is marked at roadway level by a gradual incline and brick wall with sawn bluestone capping, now partially truncated, on the west side. Its unusual form is enhanced by the rows of peppercorns and elms on either side and, as a consequence of its elevation, by the absence of abutting land uses, which cause it to separate the Westgarth area from Rucker's Hill to the north. It offers a counterpoint to the broad boulevard south of Westgarth Street, both sections of High Street. This section retains its aluminium painted overhead wire span poles that can be seen as a group due to the absence of other features. At the southern end of the ramp there is a drinking fountain erected in 1914 to commemorate the attainment of city status by the former Municipality of Northcote. The ramp and fountain form a dignified approach to the Council's town hall and municipal offices at the top of the hill.

On the south edge of the escarpment Federation period villas predominate, although the number of Victorian cottages and terraced rows west of High Street is considerably greater than on the east side. On the lower slopes of the Hill, there are two areas of Inter-War bungalows, one on either side of High Street, indicating that this more difficult terrain was the last to be subdivided.

On the east of the ramp, towards the top of the slope at Clarke Street are several early buildings. The shops and residence at 136-44 High Street were built c1866 or later. A plan of Upper Northcote (c1866) shows four cottages built near the street frontage in this location. The timber cottage at 138 High Street, with its high pitched hip roof and simple elevation, appears to be by far the oldest of the group. 142-4 High Street appears to have been built (or rebuilt) as a pair in the 1870-80 period, while 136 is later still. Only 140 High Street, with its low hip roof and brick chimney, approaches 138 High Street in age, although 138 High Street has been renovated (c1925). This group represents perhaps the earliest residential-row development subdivision in Northcote and 138 High Street is one of the municipality's early houses.

At the top of Rucker's Hill is the main civic centre of Northcote, with the Town Hall, and the Northcote Free Library. The Northcote Free Library, 185-87 High Street, was designed by the architect Edward Twentymann (Jnr) and built in 1911. It was financed by a grant of £3,000 from the American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. The design, in a Renaissance Revival style, possibly a result of Carnegie's directions, was conservative for the time,

but harmonises with the 1888 town hall.

The town hall was built in stages. The original section was completed in 1891 to the design of George R. Johnson, a prolific designer of town halls (he also designed the Collingwood and Fitzroy town halls). In time, the space used as the town hall (originally designed as a supper room) proved too small and Sydney Smith and Ogg designed a new town hall in 1912. The style used is that of the French Second Empire which was commonly used in Europe as well as Australia for public buildings. Compared with the Fitzroy and Collingwood designs, Northcote's elevations are more exuberant. The municipal offices and town hall dominate that part of the Northcote hill, and with the library form part of a fine public building group, with the police station and Presbyterian Church forming an impressive backdrop, which is reinforced by the demolition of the nondescript offices between the library and Town Hall and the new landscaping (being carried out in 2004).

North of the Town Hall is a long shopping strip, following the tram route, with a largely intact commercial streetscape of one and two storey late nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings. The following buildings have been identified in the 'City of Northcote Urban Conservation Study' (1982) by Graeme Butler.

203-5 High Street, is a pair of two storey stuccoed brick shops with residential accommodation above, built in 1888 by Edwin Bastings, perhaps Northcote's most well-known pioneer and storekeeper. His first tenants were two well-known Northcote names: J. Latrobe Bagley, of Bagley Brothers auctioneers and land agents, and next to him Samuel Angior, a chemist. The pair of shops have an arched and piers parapet entablature, a pronounced bracketed and dentillated cornice, and arched fenestration to the upper level. They are opposite the town hall and complement its stucco decoration, forming a suitable environ for the public building precinct.

The Peacock Hotel, 210 High Street (1890), replaced an earlier hotel, and was renovated in 1897. George Plant, a mayor and councillor (1884-91), was the licensee. It has been faced with Egyptian-style stucco and glazed dado tiles. Although an uncommon style, and thus an important one, in Victoria, this is not a fully developed example, but is the only one in Northcote. The building has played an important role in the hat has always been the commercial centre of the municipality.

The former Northcote Theatre, 212-20 High Street, was built in 1912 by the Northcote Picture Theatre Company upon the advent of feature-length films, and is considered to be the earliest known purpose-built cinema to survive in Victoria. The architect was Edward Twentymen Jnr. The Northcote Theatre was designed in a manner followed by many other cinemas such as the Pavilion in Brisbane (c1913), the Empress in Sydney (1913) and the Melbourne Majestic Theatre (1912). The central tall-arched motif was dominant, flanked by flat-headed openings and surmounted by an arched dentillated cornice. Smooth stucco rustication fills in the body of the facade while two string-moulds contain panelled areas and a central pediment at first level dado height. It was the first building in Northcote to be lighted by electricity. The cinema closed in 1960.

Wallis Buildings, a terrace of eleven shops and residences, 223-43 High Street, were constructed by the builder William Wallis in 1886-89. In 1886 he built five shops and residences; three years later he added three more and by 1891 the total was eleven. Opposite are other notable terraces: the row of four two storey shops at 226-32 High Street (1889-90) which are stuccoed, with a bracketed cornice and parapet, and each has a small pediment; to the north (numbers 234-40) is a similar terrace of 1893, differing mainly in its richer decoration.

A few simpler buildings survive from the 1860s, such as 245 and 356-8 High Street. They represent the early commercial development of High Street, which was overwhelmed in the development of the 1880s and 1900-1920. 245 High Street lies at what was the first commercial centre, which was situated around Bastings's store and post office and the hotel opposite.

The surviving portion of the former Wesleyan Chapel and Schoolroom at 248-50 High Street was built in 1854 of coursed bluestone rubble, lengthened in 1855 to produce the now extant rear facade, and extended sideways in brick in 1888. It has a simple single storey gables form with oculi in the gables. It was Northcote's first public building, and according to the Butler study might even be the oldest Wesleyan church in Victoria. Shops were later built across the front, probably c1908. A new Wesleyan Gothic bluestone church was built opposite, at 249-50 High Street, in 1869-70, and extended in 1886.

Other interesting shops are 262 High Street (an unusual example of a two storey shop with a cast iron balcony on the first floor), and 285 High Street (an ornate two storey stuccoed shop and balconied residence by the architect

James Birtwhistle).

The banks in High Street are also notable, especially the two storey stuccoed Renaissance Revival buildings with the Italian palazzo form which was common for banks in the nineteenth century. These had the banking facilities on the ground floor and the manager's residence on the first floor. They include the impressive former National Bank of Australasia (312 High Street), built in 1890 to a design by George Jobbins; the former London Chartered Bank of Australia (342 High Street) by Oakden, Addison and Kemp, which opened in 1891. The Moderne former Bank of New South Wales, at 326-30 high Street, on the corner of Separation Street forms an impressive termination to this stretch of High Street.

## **Intactness**

High Street Northcote is a remarkably intact suburban shopping strip of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The majority of the buildings date from around 1890 and the period before WWI.

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