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# Learmonth Heritage Precinct



LEARMONTH HERITAGE  
PRECINCT

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## Municipality

## Level of significance

Included in Heritage Overlay

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO180

## Heritage Listing

Ballarat City

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

The Learmonth Precinct is **historically** significant at a **LOCAL** level (AHC criterion A 3, 4 and H.1).

*(a) the place's importance in the course, or pattern, of Australia's natural or cultural history;*  
*(a3) importance in exhibiting unusual richness or diversity of built landscapes and cultural features;*  
*(a4) & (h1) importance for association with events, developments, cultural phases and individuals which have had a significant role in the human occupation and evolution of the region.*

The Precinct is historically important for its association with the early pastoral development of the district by the Learmonth family, who took up the pastoral stations of Buninyong (or Boninyong as it was also called) Burrumbeet and later Ercildoune run. The Learmonth family settled in the area together with Thomas Bath and others, in the late 1840s, attracted by the good grazing land and the permanent waters of Lake Learmonth and the nearby creeks which supplied the lake. Livingstone Learmonth is noted as an excellent sheep breeder, which was instrumental in the early success of the pastoral stations.

The Precinct is historically important for its ability to demonstrate the sustained early agricultural development on the rich volcanic soils of the district after the discovery of gold in Ballarat, which brought a rapidly increasing population to the district. Increase demands for meat and other supplies stimulated the growth of Learmonth from the 1850s, which was first surveyed by Assistant Surveyor John Carruthers in 1859. The availability of fresh water and good grass encouraged settlers, many of whom saw an opportunity to make money supplying food to the goldfields.

The Precinct is important as a historical landscape of unusual richness; the small township of Learmonth is bound by the ancient volcanic cones of Brown's Hill, Saddleback Hill, Weatherboard Hill and Bankin Hill with Lake Learmonth being located roughly in the centre of the four hills. The present township site is located astride the current Sunraysia Highway, which was originally a busy road northwest from Ballarat to Avoca cut between the lake and Bankin Hill. This location, some 18kms from Ballarat, was an easy day's ride on the way to the Avoca goldfields and beyond and placed it as an overnight stopping place. Hotels, stables and boarding houses met the demand. When the gold rushes ceased and deep mining became more common the Learmonth became a service town to Ballarat. Through the 1860s and 1870s Learmonth became a busy township with 4 blacksmiths, several hotels, 2 bakeries, a doctor and 4 general stores as well as saddler's shops. Many of these buildings are still well preserved.

Learmonth is particularly associated with the emerging role of local government in Victoria during the late 19th century, being located within the first Shire to be established in Victoria. The Shire of Ballarat was proclaimed on 24 November 1863 and the foundation stone of the Shire Hall (now the headquarters of the Learmonth Historical Society) was laid on 5 November 1866. Richmond Park adjacent to Lake Learmonth was named in 1873 after James Richmond, who commenced as the first full time Shire Secretary in 1866 and served in this position until his death in 1879.

Learmonth is historically important as an agricultural focus for the surrounding district for a long period of time. Its strategic importance is evidenced by the many incremental changes and additions to civic buildings such as the police station, which was enlarged in 1904 and the Temperance Hall was formally constituted into the Learmonth Mechanics' Institute and Free Library in 1912, while two years later a new Library with Billiard room were added to the Institute. In 1915 the Masonic Temple was opened and throughout the 1930s further changes to the urban fabric took place clearly demonstrating the prosperity of the area.

Learmonth and its environs are historically important for their ability to illustrate the evolution of farming practices over the past 150 years. The volcanic landscape with its broad plains, lakes and steep volcanic cones was greatly modified by intensive farming practices resulting from the miner's petitioning government to release land in 1854 with the subdivision of Creswick, Yuille's, Clarke and Learmonth runs, and Ercildoune and Dowling Forest stations as well as later sub-divisions resulting from the Land Acts. The impact of this development led to the construction of an intricate matrix of narrow country roads, linear fences and cypress windbreaks which delineated the rectangular layout of these smaller properties.

The Learmonth Heritage Precinct is **architecturally** significant at a **LOCAL** level (AHC criteria D.2, E.1).

*(d) its importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of: (i) a class of Australia's Cultural places; or (ii) a class of Australia's cultural environments (including way of life, custom, process, land-use, function, design or technique);*

*(e) its importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group.*

The Precinct demonstrates many original and early design qualities associated with the residential, commercial, civic, and cultural/community development of the Learmonth Township between the 1850s and the 1930s. It is architecturally significant as it still retains many of the original subdivisions which date from the first land sales in November 1859 and February 1860. It still retains its rural atmosphere, effectively consisting of a small village with all the buildings one block deep, fronting either side of the highway which bisects the town.

The Learmonth Precinct is characterized by a mixture of mid to late 19th and early 20th century residential, commercial, civic and cultural/community buildings. The majority of the individually residences in the Learmonth Precinct are single storey and detached, with a small number attached to associated stores. The majority of these residences are traditional timber frame weatherboard structures but there are exceptions such as the former Church of England Manse at 9-11 Bankin Street, the house at 224 High Street and the house at 13 McKay Street, the house at 317-319 High Street, and the former Presbyterian Manse at 107 Church Street. These latter buildings stand out in the streetscape due to their notable designs and construction materials. Most of the houses are of a Victorian style, from the mid to late 19th century, with a few late Federation and early Inter-War Bungalow styles. The houses are generally similar in size, although there are a few smaller Victorian cottages. Almost all the houses have characteristic verandahs and chimneys which are a feature of the townscape.

Many of the civic, commercial and cultural/community buildings in this Precinct date back to the early period of expansion in 1850s-1860s. Learmonth became a prosperous centre of local government, commerce and trade, and a cultural focus for the district. A number of the early buildings still remain, and include the Stag Hotel (c.1854) and timber Presbyterian and Catholic churches (c.1857), the police station, along with a brick stables and brick lock-up and Courthouse, erected around 1860 and in 1864. The present stone Church of England was opened in 1861, construction of the present Catholic Church began in 1873, and the present Presbyterian Church (which was designed by noted English church architect, Charles Hansom, with its construction overseen by Ballarat architect Henry Caselli) was opened in 1876. The school opened in 1862, a branch of the National Bank was opened in Learmonth in 1866, and a Temperance Hall (later the Mechanic's Institute) was opened in 1867. Other buildings are associated with the later consolidation of the town notably during the Federation period (c.1900-1915) and the Inter-War period (1920-40), as identified by the additions to the former Mechanics Institute (1914), the Masonic Hall (1915), the Learmonth Avenue of Honour (after 1919), and the alterations and additions made to the Stag Hotel (c.1930s).

A defining characteristic of the Precinct is its small scale nature of the buildings and dominance of the tree lined avenue. Most of the buildings have similar massing, form, are single storey height and are of a traditional form.

The Learmonth Precinct is **aesthetically** significant at a **LOCAL** level (AHC criteria D.2, E.1).

*(d) its importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of: (i) a class of Australia's Cultural places; or (ii) a class of Australia's cultural environments (including way of life, custom, process, land-use, function, design or technique);*

*(e) its importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group;*

Learmonth Precinct demonstrates important visual qualities that reflect the historical and cultural development of the township and surrounding areas, and contribute to the rural and architectural setting of the township. These qualities include the treelined character of the main highway that bisects the town, particularly the length of the highway between Queen Street and Morton Street, which is flanked on either side by a wide grassed median strip landscaped with an avenue of mature deciduous trees including elm, plane and oak trees; the lengthy Learmonth Avenue of Honour along the south-eastern approach to the town; and the densely planted ANA Avenue of cypress trees along the north-western approach to the town. Complex views across and through the precinct to Lake Learmonth, along and across the grassy embankment of the former railway line, of the rear of the buildings facing High Street, and towards the surrounding agricultural farmland and volcanic hills, provide important visual links to the foundations of the town's settlement and its later development.

Other important aesthetic qualities include the significant urban foci, notably the two large Monterey cypress trees in the grounds of the All Saints Church of England, which form an important focus to arrival and departure at the south-east end of the town; the Stag Hotel at the intersection of High Street (Sunraysia Highway) and Morton

Street which forms an important focus to arrival and departure at the northwest end of the town; the commemorative street lamp and the war memorial located in the grassed median strip in front of the former Shire Offices, and the spire of the Presbyterian (former Uniting) Church.

Further significant aesthetic elements and foci are the Memorial Wall at the beginning of the Avenue of Honour, the Railway memorial at the junction of the former railway embankment with the Sunraysia Highway, the memorial plaque and Redwood tree planted in memory of ANA member, Michael Casey, and the concrete mile markers '83' and '84'.

The Learmonth Precinct is **scientifically** significant at a **LOCAL** level (AHC criterion C.2 and F).

*(c) its potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Australia's natural or cultural history; (f) importance for its technical, creative, design or artistic excellence, innovation or achievement.*

The Morton's Channel cutting is of importance for contributing to a history of the establishment, maintenance and irrigation of large tracts of farmland by early settlers constructed in c.1863. Water for irrigation of the pasture lands was always an issue in the area, and rather than drain the swampy Lake Learmonth for use as a town common, it was decided to create a diversionary channel by which water could be brought over the divide from Coghill's Creek. It helped maintain the level of the lake for use in irrigation by diverting water which came from Mount Bolton and Mount Addington via a creek located some distance to the north. A water gate on the creek allowed water to be diverted into the channel or down the creek. The line of this channel is still evident, as is the diversion gate, and it is important as an early (and possibly the first) example of water diversion in Victoria.

The Learmonth Precinct is **socially** significant at a **LOCAL** level (AHC criterion G.1).

*(g) the place's strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.*

This area of Learmonth is recognized and highly valued by the local community for commercial, civic, cultural, religious, commemorative and recreational reasons.

The three major volcanic hills closest to the new township, Brown's Hill, Bankin Hill and Sellwood Hill and particularly Lake Learmonth itself have long provided places of natural beauty for the growing population of Learmonth, as well as visitors to the area. The lake has always been a central focus of the district. In the past an annual regatta was held at Lake Learmonth and was always a popular event as was the Learmonth Agricultural Show. Both events attracted crowds from nearby towns such as Miner's Rest and Beaufort as well as from Ballarat. The Learmonth Ski and Powerboat Clubhouse and the Yacht Clubhouse are located on the east side of the lake.

The wide streets of Learmonth are heavily planted with shade trees and the provision of generous and well-planted public parklands make the township an attractive place to visit. Ballarat visitors often journeyed by train to Learmonth for regular picnics in the parks or by the lake where the shoreline was all reserved for public use.

Learmonth is also a town proud of its history and the Avenue of Honour along the highway carefully remembers each soldier, nurse and chaplain, in fact all who served, by the placement of a tree. An Obelisk located in the centre of the town in High Street commemorates the death of Sgt. Charles Vaughan in 1901 during the Boer War. The local ANA, established in 1887, planted an avenue of trees in 1917 along the west edge of the Sunraysia Highway on the north-western approach to the town. They also planted the Redwood tree at the southern end of the avenue, and marked it with a separate memorial plaque to ANA member Michael Casey, who died in 1932.

Hermes Number 156836

Property Number

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## Physical Description 1

Learmonth is a small township to the north east of Ballarat along the Sunraysia Highway. The precinct incorporates the township which is effectively one block deep either side of the highway with Learmonth lake providing the southern border to the town and the Morton's channel defining the western boundary of the town. The Precinct also extends some 3½ kilometres along the Sunraysia Highway to the south-east with the Avenue of Honour that terminates at Ryans Road, and a short distance along the Sunraysia Highway with the ANA Avenue (see map below).

The Learmonth Precinct is especially characterised by its 19th and early 20th century mixed residential, commercial, civic and cultural buildings and structures.

The Learmonth Precinct incorporates the township of Learmonth. The Learmonth family and Thomas Bath settled in the region in the late 1830's, attracted to the area by the good grazing land and permanent water supply of Lake Learmonth and nearby creeks.

The discovery of gold brought opportunities for people to supply produce to the goldfields. The Learmonth area attracted people to the food producing area and soon a settlement was established at the location of the present township. Learmonth was also an easy day's ride from Ballarat and became a stopping place for travellers heading towards the Avoca goldfields.

In 1859 Assistant Surveyor John Carruthers formally surveyed the township which set out the allotment and reserves seen today. The original subdivision was laid out focusing on the main thoroughfare passing through the middle of the settlement. The formal layout of the public buildings and commercial premises all face the Sunraysia Highway, while the residential blocks nearly all face the highway and extend no further than one block from the highway. During the 1860's - 1870's Learmonth prospered and many of the buildings from that era remain such as the police station complex erected in 1860, the Courthouse, the Church of England, Catholic and Presbyterian churches, the school, bank and Temperance Hall (later the Mechanics Institute). Another special feature of Learmonth was its emerging role in local government. The town was located in the first Shire to be established in Victoria, in 1863 and was the municipal centre for the Shire.

In 1888, the rail way line was extended to Learmonth as a spur line from Ballarat and was subsequently dismantled in 1973, however, the curving line of the embankment, the nearby weighbridge and parts of the station platform still exist. Learmonth continued to grow at the turn of the century with the expansion of the Mechanics Institute and Police Station and the erection of a Masonic Temple.

The houses in the town reflect the early establishment of the township in the 1850's, the subsequent development in the 19th century and the further consolidation in the early decades of the 20th century. Typically, the styles include the Victorian, Federation and Interwar styled residential, commercial, civic, cultural and community buildings. Generally buildings are one storey although some of the cultural/community buildings have double height interiors and extended rooflines.

Buildings are generally constructed of brick, stone or from weatherboard, roof forms are hipped and/or gabled and made from galvanised corrugated iron, slate or Marseilles pattern terracotta tiles. Other features of the buildings are the alignment of the buildings with the street, verandahs, timber or rendered brick parapets, brick chimneys and timber framed double hung windows and doors.

Other visual qualities are the views to Lake Learmonth, along the grassy railway embankment, the rear of buildings in High Street. Also important is the view to farmland and volcanic hills which provide a visual link to the foundation of the town and its development. Other key landmarks are the two large Monterey cypress trees in the grounds of All Saints Church, the Stag Hotel, the commemorative street lamp, the War memorial and the spire of the Presbyterian Church.

The tree-lined highway with the wide grassed median strip, the Avenue of Honour and the ANA Avenue of cypress trees, contribute to the rural and architectural setting of the town.

Further significant features are the Memorial Wall at the beginning of the Avenue of Honour, the Railway memorial, the memorial plaque and Redwood tree and the concrete mile markers '83' and '84'. Morton's Cutting, built in 1863 is also scientifically important for its contribution to the history of the establishment and maintenance of irrigation to large tracts of farmland established by early settlers.

*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/>*