

# Victorian Heritage Database Report

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## ROBERT BURNS STATUE



Robbert Burns in Civic Centre



Robert Burns Statue,  
1917.jpg

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### Location

181 MANIFOLD STREET CAMPERDOWN, CORANGAMITE SHIRE

### Municipality

CORANGAMITE SHIRE

### Level of significance

Registered

### Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2328

### VHR Registration

June 13, 2013

### Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

What is significant?

The life-size sandstone statue of the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns and his dog, titled *Burns*, carved by John Greenshields.

### History Summary

Robert Burns (1759-1796) was among the first of the Romantic poets, writing in both the dialect of lowland Scotland and in English, as then spoken by educated Scots. He incorporated the Scottish Enlightenment ideals of democracy, fairness, individual responsibility, and independence into his poems and songs. Burns received international recognition for the way he was able to weave his ideals, insights and political and social awareness into his poetry, which, with large-scale Scottish emigration, spread to the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The statue of Robert Burns known as *Burns* was carved in Scotland in 1830, probably at Milton, on the Clyde River, Glasgow by John Greenshields (1792-1835). Greenshields based the work on a painting by Peter Taylor, a friend of Burns, which is documented as being from life and the earliest likeness made of Burns. The sculpture illustrates Burns' words: 'One night as I did Wander,/ When corn begins to shoot,/ I sat me down to ponder,/ Upon an auld tree root'. The statue was commissioned by William Taylor, a relative of Peter Taylor who had inherited the portrait in 1829. The statue was sent to Camperdown from London on 22 March 1883 by William Taylor's son William Andrew Taylor who lived at Renny Hill, Camperdown. In April 1883 he donated the sculpture for installation in the Camperdown Botanic Gardens, where it was placed on the ground. In December 1883 it was placed on a rectangular two-metre high rendered concrete pedestal. The *Camperdown Chronicle* reported on 22 December, 1883: 'The statue of the great Scotch poet, Robert Burns, now occupies a prominent position in the Park on the pedestal which has been erected under the supervision of Mr Hamilton, architect, of Colac. The statue is now seen to great advantage, and has a most imposing appearance'.

### Description Summary

The 1830 statue of Robert Burns is life-size and carved from a block of buff-coloured sandstone with the appearance of Scottish Caen stone. Burns, wearing a countryman's hat, brim turned up at the sides, is shown seated on a forked tree stump, left hand resting on left thigh, and right elbow resting on the stump, with the right hand inside the waistcoat. Burns' dog Luath sits beside the left leg. The figures originally rested on a square pedestal constructed in 1883 and made of rendered 'rubble work cemented'. The render may have been coloured to imitate sandstone to match the sculpture. The statue was oriented so that the figure faced east towards the town. On the pedestal is a plaque made of gun metal (a type of bronze) with the words:

BURNS.

FROM AN ORIGINAL PAINTING BY HIS FRIEND,

PETER TAYLOR, EDINBURGH 1756,

BY JOHN GREENSHIELDS, EDINBURGH, 1830.

PRESENTED TO THE PUBLIC PARK BY

W. A. TAYLOR, ESQ, J P

RENNY HILL, CAMPERDOWN, 1883

The statue was vandalised a number of times, most recently and seriously in 2009. It underwent extensive repairs in 2011. The sculpture is now located on a low, turning base in the foyer of the Corangamite Shire Offices & Civic Centre, 181 Manifold Street, Camperdown. The detached fragments are in a showcase in the same foyer. The pedestal and plaque remain in the Camperdown Botanic Gardens.

### How is it significant?

The Robert Burns Statue satisfies the following criteria for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

Criterion A Importance to the course, or pattern of Victoria's cultural history

Criterion E Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics

Why is it significant?

The Robert Burns Statue is significant at the State level for the following reasons:

The statue of Robert Burns is significant for its representation of the cultural influences of Scottish migration to Australia, and to Victoria in particular. The work demonstrates early nineteenth century Scottish artistic and cultural achievement and symbolises the ongoing sense of identity felt so strongly among the Scottish diaspora across the world. The statue is one of the oldest statues of Robert Burns in the world. (Criterion A)

The statue of Robert Burns is an extremely rare, and probably unique, example in Victoria of a sandstone statue carved in the 1830s, before the foundation of the Port Philip District in 1835. Other early outdoor sculptures in Victoria were made of either bronze or marble and date from the 1860s or later. (Criterion B)

The statue of Robert Burns is significant for aesthetic reasons because of the high level of skill demonstrated by the way the sculptor, John Greenshields, resolved the complex pose of the figure and dog. He displays masterly technique in details such as the realistic appearance of the boots, creases in the clothing, the suggestion of the notebook crammed into Burns' coat pocket, the shape of the hand under the jacket and the way the coat is caught up at the back. There is clear differentiation between the textures of the moleskin, leather, textiles, bark of the tree and the dog's fur. The sculpture also illustrates the pre-photography practice of creating sculptures based on paintings. (Criterion E)

The Robert Burns Statue is also significant for the following reasons, but not at the State level:

The donation of the Burns statue to the new Public Park in the small township of Camperdown is an example of the aspiration of citizens in the nineteenth century to beautify and decorate public parks with sculpture. The inclusion of a high quality statue in the botanic gardens would have increased the township's civic pride and added to the site's reputation as a beauty spot overlooking the nearby twin crater lakes. (Criterion A)

## Permit Exemptions

General Conditions: 1. All exempted alterations are to be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place or object. General Conditions: 2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of works that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place or object are revealed which relate to the significance of the place or object, then the exemption covering such works shall cease and Heritage Victoria shall be notified as soon as possible. General Conditions: 3. If there is a conservation policy and plan all works shall be in accordance with it. Note: A Conservation Management Plan or a Heritage Action Plan provides guidance for the management of the heritage values associated with the site. It may not be necessary to obtain a heritage permit for certain works specified in the management plan. General Conditions: 4. Nothing in this determination prevents the Executive Director from amending or rescinding all or any of the permit exemptions. General Conditions: 5. Nothing in this determination exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to seek relevant planning or building permits from the responsible authorities where applicable.

Specific Condition:

Any movements of the sculpture or its components are subject to permit application. Written notification is required for any proposed conservation activities. The applicant will be notified by the Executive Director whether the conservation activity requires permit approval pursuant to the *Heritage Act 1995*, or whether it is permit exempt.

## Theme

2. Peopling Victoria's places and landscapes 9. Shaping cultural and creative life

Construction dates	1830,
Heritage Act Categories	Heritage object/s,
Other Names	Robbie Burns Statue,
Hermes Number	165957
Property Number	

## History

(abbreviated from the National Trust nomination)

### CONTEXTUAL HISTORY

#### Robert Burns and the Taylor portrait

Robert Burns (1759-1796), the subject of the sculpture, was born in 1759 in Alloway, Ayrshire. He was the eldest child of William Burness, a gardener and tenant farmer and his wife Agnes. As early as 1774, Burns was composing poetry and blending lyrics with music. His first volume of 44 poems, *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, was published in July 1786. Soon after he arrived in Edinburgh on 28 November 1786, to arrange the publication of a second edition of his poetry, he met an interior decorator and carriage painter called Peter Taylor at a dinner. Having struck up a rapport with Burns, Taylor invited him to his house for breakfast. It quickly became a regular fixture. One morning, according to his wife Elizabeth, Taylor said to Burns, 'Rabbie, if ye sit yersel' still I'll tak your picture'.

Burns died in Dumfries in 1796, achieving more fame posthumously than in life, with many songs and poems becoming international favourites in spite of the difficult Scottish lowland dialect. His works remain in print and he has spawned a vast international literature. Around the world, numerous cities have erected Burns monuments and communities run Burns societies; several universities have Burns study centres.

In 1829 Elizabeth Taylor left the Burns painting to William Taylor whose great-grandfather (according to a notation in the Burns dossier in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh) was the brother of Peter Taylor's great-grandfather. It was only after William Taylor received the painting in July or August 1829 that it first came to general public notice.

On being shown the portrait in 1829, a group of those who had known Burns personally vouched for its authenticity, including his wife Jean, his confidante Agnes McLehose, his long-time friend John Syme and Sir Walter Scott. While some asserted it was a much better likeness than the famous Alexander Nasmyth portrait, a few thought it looked more like his brother, Gilbert. Engraver John Burnet insisted that it was definitely of Burns.

In 1878 William Taylor's son William Andrew Taylor and his wife Isabella settled on a farm in Camperdown. They named the property Renny Hill after William's mother's family estate in Fife, Scotland. William Andrew Taylor brought Peter Taylor's portrait of Burns to Camperdown. In 1887 he loaned it to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. After his death in 1927, it was bequeathed to the Gallery.

#### The sculptor

John Greenshields (1792–1835), the sculptor of the work, was born in 1792 in Lesmahagow, Lanarkshire in Scotland. He became one of the most celebrated sculptors in Scotland at the time.

### HISTORY OF THE OBJECT

In 1830 William Taylor (senior) commissioned John Greenshields (1792-1835) to carve a statue of Burns based on the painting by Peter Taylor which he had inherited in 1829. An advertisement for an exhibition of the *Burns* statue and painting was published in *The Scotsman* (Vol. XV, No.1148) on 8 January 1831:

### GRAND STATUE OF THE

## IMMORTAL BURNS

*"Who walked in glory and in joy,  
Behind his plough upon the mountain side."*

Sculptured in Stone by Greenshields, of the size of life,  
and from the Original Painting by the late Mr Peter Taylor,  
both of which are now exhibited at No. 32,  
ST ANDREW SQUARE, (East Side).  
Open from 10 till 4, and 6 till 9 evening.  
Admittance - Ladies and Gentlemen, 1s.  
Tradesmen and Children, 6d.  
Season Tickets, not transferable, 5s, to be had  
from Constable and Co., and at the place of Exhibition.

William Andrew Taylor's family visited Britain in 1882-1883. The Camperdown Public Park Committee Minute Book records that the Robert Burns Statue arrived at Camperdown from London on 22 March 1883. The *Geelong Advertiser* of 25 April 1883 reported that the statue was presented to the park by Taylor and had been shipped free of charge to Camperdown (Allan Willingham, 'Camperdown, A Heritage Study', vol.1 1995).

Initially, the Greenshields *Burns* was set on the ground because it was not until November 1883 that a tender was accepted for the erection of a pedestal six feet high of 'rubble work cemented'. The *Burns* statue was oriented so that the figure faced east towards the town. It was designed by the noted Western District architect Alexander Hamilton who was also of Scottish origin. The pedestal construction was completed in December 1883. It was rendered and perhaps the last layer of render/stucco was coloured to imitate sandstone to match the sculpture. It appears to have been designed to compliment the sculpture.

In a letter dated 28 November 1883 to William Ower (Hon Secretary for the Public Park), William Taylor accepted the suggestion that a plaque be attached to the new pedestal. The *Camperdown Chronicle* reported on 22 December, 1883:

The statue of the great Scotch poet, Robert Burns, now occupies a prominent position in the Park on the pedestal which has been erected under the supervision of Mr Hamilton, architect, of Colac. The statue is now seen to great advantage, and has a most imposing appearance. The following inscription is to be placed in suitable characters on the base of the statue.

*Burns - from an original painting by his friend, Peter Taylor, Edinburgh 1876 [sic] by John Greenshields, sculptor, Edinburgh, 1830. Presented to the Public Park by W. A. Taylor Esq., J.P., Renny Hill, Camperdown, 1883.'*

The gun metal (bronze) plaque of the Robert Burns sculpture appears to have been cast using the lost wax process. It was attached to the pedestal once it was made.

Scottish migration played a great part in the settlement of Victoria, in particular the Western District. Camperdown itself was named by Charles La Trobe after the Scottish naval hero Admiral Adam Duncan, Earl of Camperdown. The donor, William Andrew Taylor was a Scottish immigrant; his wife was the daughter of a Scottish immigrant and the designer of the pedestal, Alexander Hamilton was also born in Scotland. The statue was commissioned by William Taylor's father in Scotland and copied from a Scottish painting by another Taylor relative who was a friend of Robert Burns. Taylor's donation records the family's association with the poet of international reputation.

The sculpture was seriously vandalised in 2009. The detached fragments including the majority of the hat, edge of the coat and one of the dog's legs have been retained by the Shire of Corangamite.

### Plaque Citation

Made in Scotland in 1830 by the sculptor John Greenshields and brought to Camperdown in 1883, this is one of the world's oldest statues of Robert Burns. It reflects the high regard in which Burns was held by the Western District's Scottish immigrants.

## Assessment Against Criteria

### Criterion

The Robert Burns Statue, Pedestal and Plaque satisfy the following criterion for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

Criterion A Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history Criterion E Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics

## Extent of Registration

1. The sandstone statue of Robert Burns and his dog titled *Burns*, carved by John Greenshields.
2. The detached original fragments of the sandstone statue of Robert Burns and his dog.

It should be noted that the rendered concrete pedestal for the statue of Robert Burns and his dog and the attached gun metal (bronze) plaque, located in the Camperdown Botanic Gardens, is included in the registration of the Gardens (VHR H2256).

[*Victoria Government Gazette* G 24 13 June 2013 p.1268]

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*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 data owner.*

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