

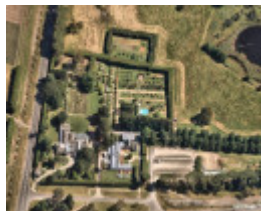
# COOMBE COTTAGE



2023 Coombe Cottage



2022 view from southwest



residential area



2022 view of north-east of Coombe Cottage looking west



2015 stable yard with stables at centre with slate roof motor house with bell tower and 2015 additions



2023 avenue of elms RHS western end near the residence looking across the southern paddock

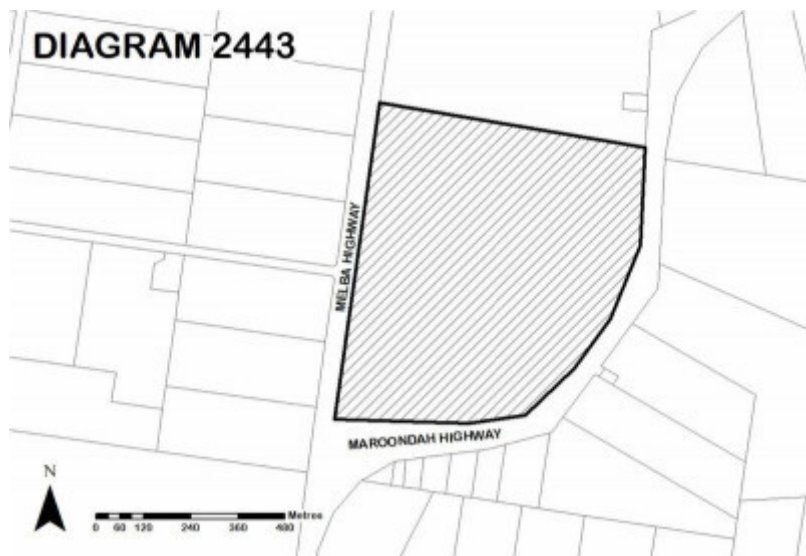


DIAGRAM 2443



aerial extent of registration

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## Location

673-675 MAROONDAH HIGHWAY COLDSTREAM, YARRA RANGES SHIRE

## Municipality

YARRA RANGES SHIRE

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2443

## VHR Registration

August 10, 2023

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - August 8, 2023

### What is significant?

Coombe Cottage, purchased by Dame Nellie Melba in 1909 and her primary residence in Australia from around 1911 to 1931, being approximately 30.78 hectares (76 acres) comprising a main house, a garden with numerous landscape features, multiple outbuildings, avenue of elms, and objects integral listed in the inventory held by the Executive Director.

### How is it significant?

Coombe Cottage is of historical significance to the State of Victoria. It satisfies the following criterion for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

#### Criterion B

Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history.

#### Criterion E

Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.

#### Criterion H

Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history.

### Why is it significant?

Coombe Cottage is a rare as an unusually intact private residence with a collection of objects belonging to a significant figure in Victoria and Australia's cultural history, Dame Nellie Melba. The place and its collection were developed over twenty years, and largely retains its layout from the late 1920s, including fixtures and fittings, decorative schemes, and examples of hand painted wallpaper. Melba was, and remains, one of the most well-known celebrities in Australian culture, and the place provides a unique insight to her life and desire to create both a home and a showpiece for her prominent social circle. The place remains unusually intact due to the ownership and care of her granddaughter Pamela Vestey over a number of decades, and of other members of the Vestey family. [Criterion B]

Coombe Cottage – including the residence, its interior schemes, decorative features, objects integral, gardens, outdoor artworks, rooftop promenade and rural setting – exhibits particular aesthetic characteristics which achieved wide acknowledgement in print media for their exceptional nature. Melba was an aesthete and created a place with outstanding qualities that reflected her sensibilities and tastes. Designed by Melba in consultation with architects, artists and artisans, Coombe Cottage was acclaimed in 1911 as a 'symphony of architecture and furniture' and 'an art gallery, a museum, and a residence in one'. [Criterion E]

Coombe Cottage is historically significant for its association with Melba, one of Australia's most famous opera singers who achieved international acclaim. Purchased as a rural retreat, the place reflects Melba's aesthetic tastes and enjoyment of a country lifestyle away from her concert touring schedule. Melba is understood to have directed the design of the house in 1911 and 1927, as well as the development of its decorative schemes, collection of objects, garden, and avenue of elms over twenty years after acquiring the property in 1909. [Criterion H]

## Permit Exemptions

### General Exemptions:

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

Places of worship: In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must **notify** the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

Subdivision/consolidation: Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

### **Specific Exemptions:**

The works and activities below are not considered to cause harm to the cultural heritage significance of Coombe Cottage subject to the guidelines and conditions below:

#### **Former Motor House (now Restaurant Dining Room) (1910-11)**

- Repair and alteration of modern internal fitouts, finishes and equipment provided that there is no change to the external building envelope and no impact or alteration of the early twentieth-century physical fabric and finishes, including timber ceiling beams, brickwork and other features
- Repair, alteration and replacement of existing externalised mechanical plant provided there is no increase in scale, footprint or height of equipment and no impact to the early twentieth-century physical fabric and presentation of the building

#### **Linking addition 2015 (which joins the Former Motor House and Stables Building) now containing restaurant reception, kitchen and interior service area**

- Repair and alteration of modern internal fitouts, finishes and equipment, provided that there is no change to the external building envelope and that no works intersect with the Former Stable Building or extant section of original Stable Building

#### **Western services and delivery area (2015)**

- Exterior repair and maintenance
- All interior works
- Removal of temporary coolroom/Removal of storage containers
- Removal and maintenance of plan

#### **Stable Building**

*Extant section of original stable (1911-12)*

- No specific permit exemptions

*South gallery entry (2015), Gallery (2015), Amenities (2015)*

- Repair and alteration of modern interior elements (such as internal fitouts, finishes, wet areas and equipment, provided that works do not intersect with any fabric of the original stable, or any elements of the original stable building (such as fireplaces)

#### **Cellar Door building**

- Exterior maintenance and repair
- All interior works

### **Public car park**

- See General Exemption 9.10

### **Landscape (does not apply to the Quilter Walk and to other hard paved areas)**

See General Exemption 9. Vegetation and landscape management

- Repair and maintenance to gravel paths and driveways retaining the existing layouts, widths, extents and surface materials
- Replacement of fruit trees and other small flowering trees with similar selections
- Removal of the contemporary Nellie Melba statue

### **Sheds and outbuildings constructed from the 1980s including the glasshouse, chemical store and pump shed**

- Exterior maintenance and repair
- All interior works
- Removal

### **Large maintenance shed (east of the carpark)**

- Exterior maintenance and repair
- All interior works
- Removal
- External works and alterations provided that there is no substantive change to the building's form, appearance and footprint

### **Objects integral**

- Temporary relocation or movement of the moveable Registered Objects Integral to the Registered Place within the residence
- Temporary external movement, relocation or loan of the moveable Registered Objects Integral to the Registered Place to Australian or Victorian government cultural institutions which have materials conservation departments, where the activity is undertaken or supervised by qualified conservators, and performed in accordance with the accepted standards, policies and procedures of the borrowing organisation concerned. The Executive Director must be notified of all such activities and the before and after loan reports prepared by the materials conservation department of the government cultural institution must be forwarded to the Executive Director.

In the event of building works (including repairs, minor works, painting and works to interior finishes) which are to be undertaken in or near locations where objects integral are located, the objects integral must be removed and stored safely away from these areas, before being returned.

# **Specific Exemptions Guidelines and Conditions**

## **Guidelines**

1. Where there is an inconsistency between permit exemptions specific to the registered place or object ('specific exemptions') established in accordance with either section 49(3) or section 92(3) of the Act and general

exemptions established in accordance with section 92(1) of the Act specific exemptions will prevail to the extent of any inconsistency.

2. In specific exemptions, words have the same meaning as in the Act, unless otherwise indicated. Where there is an inconsistency between specific exemptions and the Act, the Act will prevail to the extent of any inconsistency.

3. Nothing in specific exemptions obviates the responsibility of a proponent to obtain the consent of the owner of the registered place or object, or if the registered place or object is situated on Crown Land the land manager as defined in the *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978*, prior to undertaking works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions.

4. If a Cultural Heritage Management Plan in accordance with the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* is required for works covered by specific exemptions, specific exemptions will apply only if the Cultural Heritage Management Plan has been approved prior to works or activities commencing. Where there is an inconsistency between specific exemptions and a Cultural Heritage Management Plan for the relevant works and activities, Heritage Victoria must be contacted for advice on the appropriate approval pathway.

5. Specific exemptions do not constitute approvals, authorisations or exemptions under any other legislation, Local Government, State Government or Commonwealth Government requirements, including but not limited to the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*, the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*, and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth). Nothing in this declaration exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to obtain relevant planning, building or environmental approvals from the responsible authority where applicable.

6. Care should be taken when working with heritage buildings and objects, as historic fabric may contain dangerous and poisonous materials (for example lead paint and asbestos). Appropriate personal protective equipment should be worn at all times. If you are unsure, seek advice from a qualified heritage architect, heritage consultant or local Council heritage advisor.

7. The presence of unsafe materials (for example asbestos, lead paint etc) at a registered place or object does not automatically exempt remedial works or activities in accordance with this category. Approvals under Part 5 of the Act must be obtained to undertake works or activities that are not expressly exempted by the below specific exemptions.

8. All works should be informed by a Conservation Management Plan prepared for the place or object. The Executive Director is not bound by any Conservation Management Plan, and permits still must be obtained for works suggested in any Conservation Management Plan.

## **Conditions**

1. All works or activities permitted under specific exemptions must be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents harm to the registered place or object. Harm includes moving, removing or damaging any part of the registered place or object that contributes to its cultural heritage significance.

2. If during the carrying out of works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the registered place are revealed relating to its cultural heritage significance, including but not limited to historical archaeological remains, such as features, deposits or artefacts, then works must cease and Heritage Victoria notified as soon as possible.

3. If during the carrying out of works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions any Aboriginal cultural heritage is discovered or exposed at any time, all works must cease and the Secretary (as defined in the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*) must be contacted immediately to ascertain requirements under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*.

4. If during the carrying out of works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions any munitions or other potentially explosive artefacts are discovered, Victoria Police is to be immediately alerted and the site is to be immediately cleared of all personnel.

5. If during the carrying out of works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions any suspected human remains are found the works or activities must cease. The remains must be left in place and protected from harm or damage. Victoria Police and the State Coroner's Office must be notified immediately. If there are reasonable grounds to believe that the remains are Aboriginal, the State Emergency Control Centre must be immediately notified on 1300 888 544, and, as required under s.17(3)(b) of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*, all details about the location and nature of the human remains must be provided to the Secretary (as defined in the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*).

## Theme

4. Transforming and managing the land 6. Building towns cities and the garden state 9. Shaping cultural and creative life

Construction dates	1890,
Architect/Designer	Catani, Carlo, Butler, Walter Richmond, Grainger & Little, Guilfoyle, William, Cheetham, F. Keith,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place, Registered object integral to a registered place,
Hermes Number	2825
Property Number	

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## History

### Nellie Melba's Career

## Early life

Dame Nellie Melba (1861-1931) was born Helen Porter Mitchell in Melbourne to parents Isabella Dow and well-known builder and businessman David Mitchell. She became a world-famous opera singer and one of the greatest celebrities of her day. Melba (then Helen Mitchell) was educated at Leigh House, a boarding school in Richmond, and later at Presbyterian Ladies' College and studied singing and piano. Prodigious at a young age, she had perfect pitch and an innate flair for entertaining. In 1881, following the death of her mother and sister, Helen aged twenty, travelled north with her father to Mackay in Queensland where David Mitchell built the Marian Sugar Mill. In 1882, she met and married Charles Nisbett Frederick Armstrong. They married in Brisbane and moved into the Marian Sugar Mill's manager's home where their only child George was born in 1883. In 1884, the family returned to Melbourne where Nellie resumed her singing lessons with teacher Pietro Cecchi to fulfil her dream of a career in music.

## A career in opera

In 1886 Melba, Charles, George and the other Mitchell children accompanied David Mitchell to London. She became a pupil of Mathilde Marchesi in Paris. Marchesi encouraged a change of name, so with a nod to the city

of her birth, Nellie Armstrong transformed into the more lyrical Nellie (Madame) Melba. She made her debut as an opera singer in Brussels in 1887, at Covent Garden in 1888 and in Paris in 1889.

Over the next twenty years the young Australian was one of the most famous opera singers in the world. She was acclaimed by critics and audiences in London, Paris, Monte Carlo, Brussels, Milan, Vienna, Stockholm, Berlin, St Petersburg, New York, Chicago and many other cities. She sang before kings, emperors and presidents and moved easily among the highest ranks of European society. By the early 1900s, Melba represented glamour, success, and international acceptance in Britain and Europe of a newly federated Australia. In 1902 and 1907 she returned home for concert tours in Australia before resuming her international career. She toured Australia again in 1909.

## Melba's Purchase (1909)

# A visit to Coldstream

In 1909 Melba (then almost aged 50) bought a 30.78 hectare (76 acre) property in Coldstream. This purchase took place during Melba's 'Sentimental Tour' of Australia on which she covered 10,000 miles (16,093 kms) across the country and was greeted with adulation in cities and towns. During this tour, Melba spent time with her family in the Yarra Valley, a region where her father, David Mitchell, and brother, Charlie, resided. According to her granddaughter Pamela Vestey, Melba saw John Dooley's property for sale while returning to St Hubert's Winery (leased by David Mitchell in 1902) after a drive and immediately purchased it from Dooley's widow.

Biographer John Hetherington notes that Melba had 'for some years thought of buying herself a small country property and making an Australian home' and in Coombe found 'a piece of country she wanted for herself'. Biographer Ann Blainey writes:

*After months of searching through the Yarra Valley, she had come upon a small farm at Coldstream, with magnificent views of those Blue Mountains and rolling Green hills she had so loved as a child. Just twenty-seven miles from Melbourne, it was comfortingly close to her father's vineyard near Lilydale, and to her brother, Charlie and his family at Cave Hill. Later, she bought more land [Coombe Farm to the northeast], so as to transform the small farm into a place where George could raise horses and fatten cattle.*

In addition to her house and land purchase (costing £2165) Melba also bought from Dooley goods, chattels and livestock for a further £585. These included two horses valued at £22/3/-, three cows at £12, carriages and harnesses. Melba was a skilled horsewoman had learnt to ride horses as a child. In 1911 a newspaper report commented:

*Her dream materialised. On a site commanding the country over which as a girl she cantered on a galloping pony – the natives [locals] will vouch for it that she has never used a saddle, and was always galloping – is Coombe Cottage.*

Melba's memoir of 1925 opens with a reflection on her connection to Coombe:

*... I have built my Australian home, Coombe Cottage, almost within sight and sound of the same trees and vineyards in which I played as a child, under the same brilliant sunshine, facing the same sudden storms that sweep in... from the hills... If you wish to understand me at all... you must understand first and foremost, that I am an Australian... And for me, whatever adventures may be in store, whatever songs there are still to sing, I shall always come back to rest in the shadow of the blue mountains...*

Melba had a long association with the Lilydale and Coldstream area stemming from periods of her childhood holidays spent at her father David Mitchell's property Killara at Steele's flats. Pamela Vestey writes that Melba's 'delight in country life was heightened by the fact that most of her life was spent in the confinement of theatres or hotels'.

## From Callion Lodge to Coombe Cottage



The Dooley property originally formed part of the Yering pastoral run, purchased in 1850 by Paul Frederic de Castella, who along with his brother Charles Hubert de Castella became renowned vigneron. Paul de Castella further developed the existing Ryrie Brothers' vineyard at Yering but in 1852 he relinquished the run retaining 2000 acres freehold including the land on which Coombe Cottage was developed. According to the rate books, by 1896, James Speakman, mining speculator, owned the 76-acre site of Coombe Cottage. It is probable that he built the original stone cottage on the site in the 1890s as by 1901 the value increased to £120, and the property gained a name 'Callion Lodge'. In 1904 John Dooley purchased the property.

## A Vision for Coombe (1909-12)

# Commission, design and construction

Melba chose the name 'Coombe Cottage' for her country home, inspired by her stay at Coombe Cottage in Surrey (now known as Coombe House) in the English summer of 1906. Over time, the modest farmhouse was transformed into a rambling single-storey country retreat with nine bedrooms, eight bathrooms, dining room and music room, new verandahs, a cellar and an unusual rooftop promenade with pergola. The interior of each room was carefully designed, and the residence was filled with furniture and *objets d'art* from Melba's travels.

From 1909 Melba set about enlarging the existing small cottage and creating a garden. She commissioned Grainger and Little, the firm of architect and engineer John Harry Grainger, father of Percy Grainger, to design the additions to the house. Melba was deeply engaged in the design process. She and Grainger worked on a vision of a large single-storey house with wide verandahs, a garden, sweeping lawns, and swimming pool with a high cypress hedge.

John Harry Grainger (1854-1917) was an architect and civil engineer who arrived in Australia from England in 1877 to take up a post in the Engineer-in-Chief's Office in Adelaide. He set up a private practice in Melbourne and in partnership with Charles D'Ebro submitted the winning design of Princes Bridge. As chief architect in the Western Australian Department of Public Works from 1897 to 1905, he designed sections of the Western Australian Museum and Art Gallery, Public Library of Western Australia, Perth Law Courts, and the first stage of Parliament House. Back in Melbourne, he joined another architectural partnership Grainger, Little and Barlow whose work included the Administration Block of the Melbourne Town Hall. The famous musician, Percy Grainger, was his son.

## A new wing

In 1909 at the time of purchase, the residence was of masonry construction and generally L-shaped in plan. The main bedroom wing ran along a north-south axis, extending east from the southern end toward a separate dairy building. Between 1911 and 1912 a vast wing was constructed to the east of the existing cottage. Some of the notable elements of this design were:

**New stables and motor house:** These were constructed to the east of the residence. The original stables were demolished. The new garage was crowned by a clock tower bearing the Scottish phrase: 'East, West, Hame's Best'. The garage housed Melba's two touring cars, and the stables accommodated her two bay horses which drew the 'high phaeton [carriage] she drives about the countryside'. Melba was a horserider and her son George was an avid fox hunter.

**Hallways lined with hand-painted wall paper:** Melba's influence extended to the extant hand-painted Japanese wallpaper in the hallway. She is said to have designed the painted hallway of Australian foliage and birds, which was then carried out by a Japanese artist.

**Music Room:** A magnificent music room was created befitting the successful opera singer, which was panelled and raftered with blackwood and able to accommodate musical performances.

**Rooftop promenade and pergola:** A flat roof promenade was built above Melba's bedroom, now accessed from a non-original spiral stair from the lawn. Whilst specified in concrete, this roof was constructed in timber but is supported from composite steel and concrete beams. Originally, the roof promenade included a timber pergola, and views over the Yarra Ranges could be gained from this area. The pergola is understood to have been removed some time during the 1980s.

**Avenue of Elms:** Melba established an avenue of 76 English elms on either side of a driveway/track from the east of the residential area to the Caretaker's/Gardener's House, running parallel to the road to Healesville.

**Recreation facilities:** Two tennis courts and a croquet lawn.

**Garden Features:** 8-metre-long herbaceous borders, elaborate rose beds.

**Swimming pool:** The swimming pool, pergola and changing rooms were built in 1913. Private swimming pools were not common at that time.

**Water supply:** The place had no natural water source, so Melba negotiated with various landowners for easements on their titles so she could construct a private water main from Lilydale township. This meant that Coombe Cottage could be sewered, and its vegetable and fruit gardens irrigated.

Most of the original Dooley residence and the dairy are still extant within the larger extent of the cottage, although substantially modified. The current entrance lobby and adjacent study are remnants of the earlier buildings.

## Gardens and grounds

Several prominent gardeners were linked to the garden at Coombe Cottage, including William Guilfoyle (director of the Royal Botanic Gardens), Carlo Catani (the Italian-born landscape engineer), and Walter Butler (architect of later additions to the property but also a well-known garden designer and advocate of formal styles of landscaping).

In 1910, *The Weekly Times* reported that Guilfoyle was preparing the gardens at Coombe. Melba's granddaughter Pamela Vestey later stated that although Guilfoyle provided advice, the general design came from Nellie Melba herself. In late 1911 the press reported that Guilfoyle had spent a year laying out the gardens, which included '*wide lawns, a croquet space, grass tennis courts, and pleasant paths with flowers in great profusion colouring the landscape. The road to Healesville is hidden by a hedge...*' Guilfoyle was praised as having '*succeeded in his endeavours to create a splendid garden ready made by transplanting trees of considerable size*,' with the rooftop pergola singled out as '*already a mass of greenery and dainty bloom*' presumably generated from the transplantation of advanced vines to the site. In another source, George Cooper, the head gardener of the Botanic Gardens is said to have laid out Melba's garden under William Guilfoyle's direction. Cooper's son, George William Cooper, recollected his father's work at Coombe and the influence of Melba's suggestions on the design of her garden.

Pamela Vestey recalled that most of the trees in the gardens were planted around 1912-13, although a large oak tree to the south-east of the cottage predated Melba's occupation and was marked 'old oak tree' in the architects Grainger & Little drawing of 1911. Early photography shows that the Cedar to the north-east of the cottage was established during Melba's initial period of garden development. The swimming pool, changing pavilions and ornamental trellis were constructed in 1913, enclosed within a trimmed hedge and set within the extensive Italianate grounds and orchards that occupy the eastern part of the gardens. White-flowering Wisteria were established on the swimming pool pergola and remain in place today.

A summerhouse was also constructed during the early years of Melba's ownership; this may be the extant timber summerhouse located in the north-west of the garden. A formal walk was constructed at an early date along the central spine of the gardens, it consists of tightly set rectangular stones running between ornamental herbaceous borders; an ornamental bronze sundial is set on a plinth within the walk's central intersection. The walk was said by Melba to have been named for a 'Captain' Quilter, who had given Melba the stones and the Queen Anne

period sundial before being killed in World War I.

## Life at Coombe

Around 1911-12 Melba commenced residing at Coombe Cottage, and increasingly it became the centre of her operations; nearly half of her remaining years would be spent in Australia. During World War I, Melba's son George Armstrong and his wife Evelyn (nee Doyle) had made Coombe Cottage their home and lived there with their daughter Pamela, born in 1918. During World War I Melba raised substantial funds for the war effort in Australia. So great were her efforts, that in 1918 she was recognised by King George V as a Dame of the British Empire (DBE). During this period, she taught at the Albert Street Conservatorium of Music (later named the Melba Memorial Conservatorium in her honour). Melba was also a pioneering force in the gramophone industry, making over 100 records between 1904 and 1926.

## Additions and works 1926-27

Between 1926 and 1927 Melba (then aged 65) commissioned various new works at Coombe. These included:

- Construction of a gate lodge in 1926 at the southwest entrance of the property to a design by prominent architect Walter Butler. Butler's firm, W & L Butler & Martin, was purportedly inspired by the gate lodge at Highclere Castle outside of London. The gatehouse was built on the site of a shrubbery which was removed. Butler (1864-1949) was one of the most prominent architects in Melbourne and was sought after by wealthy clients. His work reflected the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement and the Domestic Revival style, as well as a belief in the importance of formal garden design.
- Fixing leaks and cracks in the walls and attending to an overgrown garden.
- Construction of additions to the north, south-west and south-east of the residence and further rearrangement of spaces within the residence.
- Extensive sections of stone wall were constructed to the south and west boundaries of the residence and garden area.
- Replacement of the original timber entrance gates and several other gates on the property with iron gates bearing the stylised 'M', reportedly made for Melba in Edinburgh.
- Installation of new gates at the entrance to the swimming pool; the central wrought iron gates were purchased from an old English garden, with new side panels designed by Butler & Martin and manufactured at Melbourne.
- The installation of pedestals surmounted by deer statues presented to Melba by the Marquis of Ripon, on either side of the new gates at the entrance to the swimming pool.
- Replacement of sections of the hedge c.1927-1928 following a fire.

By 1928 the cypress hedge surrounding the residential area was described as a '*formal hedge of great density*'. Edna Walling provided plans for some landscaping works in 1927, but these were never undertaken. She did, however, refer three women gardeners to Madame Melba who employed them to keep the grounds and gardens in good order.

## 'A symphony of architecture and furniture'

From the 1910s, Madame Melba's Coombe Cottage was celebrated by the press of the day as an extraordinary place that formed a noticeable feature of the landscape. In 1911 one journalist proclaimed 'There is no other home in Australia quite like it. It is not obtrusive, in no way ostentatious; but just peacefully beautiful'. A 1911 article featured in *Punch* stated that Coombe Cottage was a '*symphony of architecture and furniture*,' and that Melba's transformation of the property from the overgrown state of the former residence to aesthetic level that '*would have delighted Polonius*', with the property presenting as a country residence that a 'gentleman of large wealth and artistic tastes might build.' In *Table Talk* Joan Lindsay wrote in 1928:

*What is the keynote of its charm? Perhaps it is that there is nothing formal, not even the architecture, which is entirely successful in expressing its creator's conception of a home... In the late afternoon, behind the stable tower, you can see the hills fading to purple... along the wide verandah, wisteria is festooned, so that sitting in the bright painted verandah chair one looked through a trellis of blossom to the garden beyond. And here at the witching hour of cocktails, come glasses of the palest green, while through the open window of the drawing room floats the scent of flowers and a homely wood fire...'*

In 1928 the *Australian Home Beautiful* featured Coombe Cottage on the cover and devoted an article to the house, contents, garden and setting: it is 'a bewildering place to describe, for one could tell about it from many aspects, and yet fail to convey the feeling it conveys'. The residence was a treasure trove of which Melba was both the owner and curator. Although from the outside it appeared to be a typical country retreat owned by a wealthy family, the interior and its contents made the place 'unparalleled amongst 'homes'. It is an art gallery, a museum, and a residence in one.' Melba also had a house in London and a flat in Paris, but Coombe Cottage was seen as the most vivid expression of her personality with every item selected by Melba telling an interesting story. It was 'essentially Melba'.

## **Melba's relationship with Coombe Cottage**

Madame Melba's relationship with Coombe Cottage had many dimensions. The house and gardens were the venue for extravagant parties, visits from celebrated artists, and entertainments.

*Guests continually came and went at Coombe Cottage whenever Melbourne was in residence... Although Coldstream lay twenty-six miles from Melbourne, nobody ever declined an invitation to one of the parties Melba gave their own account of the journey... Melba liked to entertain her friends at Coombe cottage, to show them her treasures, to sing to them when the spirit moved her.*

In 1912, Madame Melba organised a dance at Coombe, partly to establish her son, George, in Melbourne society. She arranged for a special train to bring sixty guests from Melbourne. Coombe was Melba's showpiece. It afforded her privacy through distance from Melbourne and a hedge to stop prying eyes.

Like most celebrities, Melba had a public life and a private family life at Coombe, the latter receiving less public commentary. In addition to being a diva's showpiece, Coombe was Melba's 'bolt hole': her country retreat. Rural life in Coldstream was a counterbalance to her touring in Europe. There is evidence that Melba preferred country life over the city life and found the Australian bush restorative. During her tour in 1907, she leased the homestead at Ercildoune in the Western District, as well as a town house in Melbourne. Melba told a reporter in 1914 of winter in Australia when the hills surrounding Lilydale and Coldstream were flecked with snow and bright with a gold of wattle in bloom: 'I feel like a child with a new toy, whenever I come near this place. View, look at those hills, the snow; ah! It's good to be home again'. Although the property was never used for commercial agriculture, its sense of spaciousness appears to have been valued by Melba.

Coombe was a family home. Melba was not the only resident of Coombe Cottage. After their marriage in London in 1913, Melba's son George and his wife Evie (Evelyn Doyle, a Brisbane-born singer) returned to live at Coombe. George farmed at the nearby Coombe Farm, pursued fox hunting, 'made friends in the district and felt happy living there'. Their child Pamela was born in 1918, who reflected of her early life at Coombe: 'We had time for picnics, and expeditions in the hills; the drive over the Black Spur was quite an adventure in those days'. Melba also enjoyed being part of the Lilydale community and was involved in local activities. The Lilydale-Coldstream area came to be known as 'Melba Country'.

## **Melba's death and legacy**

In late 1928, Madame Melba returned to Europe for two years, appearing in concerts in Brighton, Paris and Egypt before her final performance in London. The year before she had been awarded the GBE (Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire) 'in recognition of services to the Commonwealth of Australia'. Her last Australian performances were in Sydney, Melbourne and Geelong in 1928. Madame Melba died on 23 February 1931 in Sydney. Melba's body was brought to Melbourne by a special train stopping at various points along the way so that people could pay their respects. Her body lay in state in Scots Church while more than 5,000 people filed

past. Her funeral was a spectacle rarely seen in Australia. Melba's obituaries attested to her status as a national icon: 'Is it too much to say', asked the *Argus*, 'that she was the greatest Australian?' In Canberra parliamentarians stood with heads bowed to honour her memory.

Prior to her death, Melba asked her son George to maintain Coombe Cottage property '*as though I were still there; as I have put my life's blood into this beloved little spot ...*' Following Dame Melba's death, the property stayed with her family and was maintained largely in the style she had established. Following the death of her husband, William Vestey in 1944, Pamela Vestey, later Pamela, Lady Vestey, and her two sons Sam and Mark resided at Coombe Cottage with her parents. Pamela returned later to England for the boys' education. Following the death of her father George in 1971 and her mother Evie in 1973, Pamela Vestey returned from England to Coombe Cottage in 1973, remaining there until her death in 2011.

From 1973, Lady Pamela oversaw the maintenance of the gardens largely in the image established by Melba, with some new garden elements established within the formal layout, such as a native garden on the former asphalt tennis court in the north-west. Some rationalisation of elements also occurred; the rooftop pergola on the cottage was removed, as were many of the short-lived trees and other elements of the garden, and elements such as the rose garden, arbours and fruit orchards were replanted and reconstructed. She constructed a dam in the southern paddock most likely between the late 1990s and 2006.

After the death of Lady Pamela, the property remained in the ownership of the Vestey family. Although the Vestey family principally live in England, Coombe Cottage (the house) is still a private residence of the family when visiting Melbourne. The house and gardens (a seven-acre area) have been transformed into 'Coombe' with a restaurant located in the restored motor house and historic clock tower. The house and gardens are open for tours.

## Melba's collection at Coombe Cottage

### History

The 'symphony of architecture and furniture' celebrated at Coombe Cottage included a substantial collection of fixtures, fittings, art and objects. Melba was a great collector of art from around the world, and the Coombe Cottage collection was amongst the most representative collection of Australian paintings to be found in Australia. Her patronage helped advance the careers of some artists, including Hans Heysen of whom she described, 'this is the coming man'. Norman Lindsay on visiting Coombe Cottage remarked that it was 'full of examples of the best Australian painters' work'. As well as works by Heysen, including his paintings of Coombe Cottage, Melba collected other Australian works by Arthur Streeton, Elioth Gruner, Norman Lindsay, Jesse Jewhurst Hilder, Margaret Preston and Alethea (Thea) Proctor.

Coombe Cottage retains a large collection of objects, which Melba was given or acquired during her career. The extensive collection includes furniture, glassware, clocks, lacquerware, silverware, paintings (including hand painted miniatures of Melba and family members, engravings and sketches), porcelain, as well as many personal items. The collection also includes furniture, along with many items brought back from England and Europe by Melba.

In 1998, Pamela Vestey donated hundreds of Melba costumes, documents, objects and photos to the Lilydale Museum (now the Yarra Ranges Regional Museum). She also donated 80 stage costumes, accessories and photos to the Victorian Arts Centre's performing arts collection.

In 2015, 162 objects were auctioned by the Vestey family at [Sothebys](#). They included furniture, ornaments and *objets de vertu* owned by Melba when she lived at Coombe Cottage, such as silver, leather and tortoiseshell items monogrammed with 'NM' and 'Nellie Melba'. Auctioned art works included those by Arthur Streeton, a close personal friend of Melba, as well as several works by female artists including Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston, Hilda Rix Nicholas, Nora Heysen and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite.

# Objects integral

In April 2023, the owners of Coombe Cottage identified 18 objects (or sets of objects) as ‘objects integral’ to be part of any VHR registration. Most these are located in three key rooms in the house: the Music Room, Melba’s Bedroom, and the Dining Room. These rooms feature prominently in press coverage during Melba’s lifetime, they retain a high level of integrity and are highly expressive of Melba’s occupation of Coombe Cottage. While primarily a country retreat, Coombe was also a place where she entertained and displayed her extensive collection of furnishings, decorative objects and artwork. Objects listed under ‘Other items’ are not linked to particular locations within the house but add in their own way to an understanding of the historical significance of the place in the context of Melba’s life. The proposed objects integral are listed at **Attachment 1**.

## Social value

Melba was the first Australian by birth to achieve international fame. She is ‘one of the few names with national mythological status: she ranks with Ned Kelly, Don Bradman and Phar Lap in the popular imagination’. In 1976 Melba appeared on an Australian stamp and featured on the Australian \$100 bank note. Audio recordings, letters and photographs of Melba are held at the State Library Victoria and the National Library of Australia. Portraits of the famous singer, including a work by Rupert Bunny, are held in collection at the NGV. The Grainger Museum of the University of Melbourne has an exceptional portrait by Baron Arpad Paszthory, which once hung at the Princess Theatre. The classic Australian dishes ‘Peach Melba’ and ‘Melba Toast’ were named after her. Today Coombe Cottage is visited by aficionados of opera and classical music, and from time to time, concerts are held in the music room.

## Selected bibliography

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Melba, *Nellie Melodies and Memories*, Butterworth, London, 1925.

Murphy, Agnes G & Melba, *Nellie Melba: A Biography*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1909.

Radic, Therese *Melba: The voice of Australia*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1986.

Vestey, Pamela *Melba: A Family Memoir*, Pamela Vestey, Melbourne, 2000 (1996).

## Assessment Against Criteria

### Criterion

Coombe Cottage is of historical significance to the State of Victoria. It satisfies the following criterion for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

### Criterion B

Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history.

Criterion E

Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.

Criterion H

Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history.

## **Extent of Registration**

### NOTICE OF REGISTRATION

As Executive Director for the purpose of the **Heritage Act 2017**, I give notice under section 53 that the Victorian Heritage Register is amended by including a place and objects in the Heritage Register:

Number: H2443

Category: Registered Place, Registered Objects Integral to a Registered Place

Name: Coombe Cottage

Location: 673-675 Maroondah Highway Coldstream

Municipality: Yarra Ranges Shire

All of the place shown hatched on Diagram 2443 encompassing all of Lot 1 on Title Plan 82832 and the objects integral as listed in the inventory dated 15 May 2023 as held by the Executive Director.

Dated 10 August 2023

STEVEN AVERY

Executive Director

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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 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/>*