

# HO108 - Former Australian Beam Wireless Receiving Station



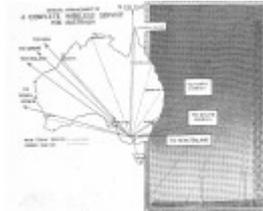
Former Wireless Beam Station



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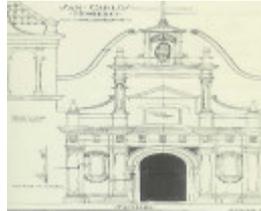
Rockbank Beam Wireless Station



In 1927 the proposed 'General Arrangement of a Complete Wireless Service for Australia' focuses on the Ballan and Rockbank Beam Stations. (Radio, May 1927, p.18) A 1939 map reveals that the shorter of these overseas links were in fact operated from differ



Early photograph of the Beam Wireless receiving station at Rockbank, Victoria. The front fence, gate, main building, and bungalows at the side (not shown) remain, together with the Canary Island Palm trees; only the hedge and watertanks are missing. (Radi



Drawing of San Carlos Church, Monterey, U.S.A. in The Western Architect, 1921. Source: M. Freeman, The Early Canberra House, Living in Canberra 1911-1933, The Federal Capital Press of Australia, Fyshwick, 1996, p.97.

## Location

653-701 Greigs Road East and 703-735 Greigs Road FIELDSTONE, MELTON CITY

## Municipality

MELTON CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2278

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO108

## Heritage Listing

Melton City

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

This place is included in the Victorian Heritage Register.

Refer to Heritage Victoria's record for this site.

Council's Statement of Significance for the site:

*Rockbank Park*, 653-701 Greigs Road, Rockbank, is significant as the substantially intact former residential quarters of the Australian Beam Wireless Receiving Station, which commenced operation in 1927, and possibly as a fine example of early twentieth century 'Commonwealth Departmental style' architecture (with particular Mission Revival overtones) in a landscape setting. It may have been designed by the Commonwealth Department of Works and Railways which was under the design control of J.S. Murdoch, Commonwealth Chief Architect and Director General of Works, and was built in 1926. The buildings and landscape setting at Rockbank Park appear to be remarkably intact.

*Rockbank Park* at 653-701 Greigs Road is architecturally significant at a STATE level (AHC D.2, E.1). The main building and associated four Bungalows demonstrate outstanding original design qualities that appear to relate to the Commonwealth's 'Departmental style' with specific Mission Revival overtones. The original design qualities of the main building include the elaborate arched portico and carriage way that appears to draw on the Mission Revival design of the San Carlos Church, Monterey, U.S.A, together with the long hipped roof form and rear hipped roofed wings clad in terra cotta tiles: the whole forming a U plan. Other intact or appropriate qualities include the symmetrical composition, single storey height, rendered brick wall construction, round ventilation turret, recessed verandahs under the main roof, paired vestigial and rendered verandah columns, regular bays of timber framed double hung windows and French doors, rendered brick chimneys and the broad eaves.

The four nearby cottages also demonstrate original design qualities typical of interwar Bungalow cottage design by the Commonwealth Department of Works and Railways and cottage types espoused by the Federal Capital Commission in Canberra. These qualities include the hipped roofs form clad in red-painted galvanised corrugated steel, rendered brick wall construction, broad eaves, simple rectilinear rendered brick chimneys, and the timber framed double hung windows.

Rockbank Park at 653-701 Greigs Road is aesthetically significant at a STATE level (AHC E.1). The substantial formal landscaped setting with mature Canary Island palms, Cypresses and other trees, open grassed areas and perimeter rose gardens, and a central drive to the main building and flanking cottages, have significant visual qualities. The landscaped setting appears to have been designed in the 'Garden Town' idiom of the Commonwealth Department of Works & Railways, which was also responsible for the development of Canberra (under the control of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee and Federal Capital Commission) in the 1920s. The 'Garden Town' has its roots in the English Garden City movement, landscape architecture of Walter Burley Griffin and his contemporaries, and the garden pavilion hotel designs and landscapes in U.S.A., including Santa Barbara, California. The metal entrance gates and surrounds also contribute to the significance of the place.

*Rockbank Park* at 653-701 Greigs Road is historically significant at the NATIONAL level (AHC A.4, H.1). It was the receiving station of the Australian 'Imperial Wireless Service' (generally known as 'the Beam' service), which in 1927 provided the nation's first radio communication with Britain and North America, first through telegraphy,

and then facsimile 'picturegram' services (1934). (It may also have provided Australia's first wireless telephone link with Britain (1930), the first such connection between Britain and a Dominion.) These were the longest radio services of their type in the world. Together with aviation, international radio communication was the marvel of the early twentieth century. For many it represented a hope of strengthening the bonds of Empire, and helping nations to communicate. In isolated Australia the Beam Wireless was regarded as the communications miracle of its age.

*Rockbank Park* is also historically significant for its association with Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia) Ltd which was the second largest radio company in the British Empire, and an Australian icon through its provision of broadcasting transmission equipment, and more popularly its design and manufacture of household radio (and later, television) receivers. In particular the establishment of the Beam service represents the greatest achievement of AWA's Sir Ernest Thomas Fisk, the outstanding figure in the early history of radio in Australia. Fisk's unswerving vision of a direct 'one hop' radio connection between Australia and Britain (and the rest of the Empire) persuaded Australian Prime Minister WM Hughes, whose strong advocacy in turn persuaded the whole British Empire to adopt this system rather than the relay system favoured by the British government. Fisk and AWA also participated in the technical development of this scheme: Australia's distance and technical competence were critical in the inter-continental experiments conducted between Fisk and Nobel Prize winner Guglielmo Marconi, which established the suitability of short-waves for long distance transmission. High-frequency short-wave transmission (combined with beam aerials) subsequently formed the operating system of the Imperial Wireless Service. *Rockbank Park* was also associated, from 1947, with AWA's successor in this field, the Overseas Telecommunications Commission. The OTC also played a leading role in communications research and development, particularly in relation to rhombic aerials (although nothing remains of this system on the site).

*Rockbank Park* is also of historical significance as one of the first radio reception/transmission stations established in Melbourne's western and north-western plains, which became a major centre of radio in Australia.

The complex may also be of historical significance for its associations with the Commonwealth Department of Works and Railways that was under the design control of J.S. Murdoch, Chief Architect and Director General of Works. Murdoch was Australia's first Commonwealth Government Architect.

Overall, *Rockbank Park* at 653-701 Greigs Road is of NATIONAL significance.

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| Heritage Study/Consultant | Melton - Shire of Melton Heritage Study phase 2, David Maloney, David Rowe, Pamela Jellie, Sera Jane Peters, 2007; |
| Construction dates        | 1926, 1927, 1969,  |
| Other Names               | Former Australian Beam Wireless Receiving Station., 653-701 Greigs Road East, Mt Cottrell,                         |
| Hermes Number             | 30249  |
| Property Number           |  |

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## Physical Description 1

### Physical Description -

The property, now known as *Rockbank Park*, 653-701 Greigs Road, Rockbank, is set within a substantial formal landscaped setting having a central drive flanked by open grassed areas with rose gardens, mature Canary Island Palms, Cypresses and other exotic tree species. The centrepiece of the complex is the main staff recreation and administration building, which is flanked by four modest interwar Bungalows of similar construction. Access to the property is through the early metal gates having flanking rendered brick piers and

surrounds and pedestrian gates. Crowning the flanking gate piers are ovoid lamps.

The planting is notable for its symmetrical layout of the distinctive Canary Island palms (*Phoenix canariensis*) of which four remain, and lozenge shaped rose beds along the central drive. The garden and the complex of buildings enclosed in a protective Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) hedge make a significant impact in the barren landscape.

The substantial, symmetrical, single storey, rendered brick, interwar eclectic Georgian and Mission Revival styled administration building is characterised by an elaborate arched portico and carriage way flanked by minor pedestrian arches. The portico has ornate round pilasters that separate the triple-arched opening that is crowned by a parapet having decorative urns. A long hipped roof form clad in terra cotta tiles traverses the site, with hipped roofed wings at the rear: the whole forming a U plan. It is crowned by a round ventilation turret. Flanking the portico are recessed verandahs under the main roof that are supported by paired rendered vestigial columns. Regular bays of timber framed double hung windows and French doors are identified on the main elevation. Early rendered brick chimneys also adorn the roofline and broad overhangs are features of the eaves.

The nearby symmetrically located houses are modestly scaled and have hipped roof form clad in red-painted galvanised corrugated steel. These rendered brick buildings have broad eaves and the roofs are adorned with simple rectilinear rendered brick chimneys. Other early features include the timber framed double hung windows.

These 'staff buildings' were originally bachelor quarters, cottages (for married personnel) and recreation rooms, all equipped with electricity and running water. Located in a district that was regarded as quite isolated, and needing staff on-hand 24 hours a day, it was necessary to provide comforts and be reasonably attractive, comfortable, and self-sufficient regarding entertainment.[1]

There were separate buildings for the wireless operation (power generation, telegraph reception, amplification, relay etc), but none of the buildings or equipment associated with these functions remain.

Similarly, apart from some concrete block guy cable anchors, nothing remains of the two great 'Franklin' or 'English' curtain antennas (supported by massive lattice steel masts 195 metres apart and 91.5 metres high) with reflectors, one directed to the UK, the other to Canada. Similarly, there is nothing remaining of the arrays of rhombic antennas that replaced them after the war.

[1] At Ballan the recreation room included a billiard table and pianola, and there were tennis courts, but there are no records of these at Rockbank, which was a little less isolated.

## Historical Australian Themes

*Melton Historical Themes: 'Developing Communications'*

### Integrity

Integrity -

- The original accommodation-related buildings and their exceptional site layout appear to be substantially intact.
- The distinctive inter-war period garden appears to be intact, although some large trees have died during the recent drought.
- All radio buildings have been removed.
- All arrays have been removed, but there are some concrete block anchors for the antennae guy cables, on this, and adjoining properties.
- Other features include the front fence and gate.

### Physical Conditions

Physical Conditions - Good

*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/>*