

# City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

**Place name:** Rotherfield  
**Other names:** Sherwood Hall

**Citation No:**  
**336**



**Address:** 14 Hennessy Avenue, Elwood

**Heritage Precinct:** St Kilda Botanical Gardens & Environs

**Category:** Residential: Mansion, Flats

**Heritage Overlay:** **HO7**

**Style:** Victorian: Italianate

**Graded as:** Significant

**Constructed:** 1890-91, 1905

**Victorian Heritage Register:** No

**Designer:** David C. Askew (1890-91)

**Amendment:** TBA

**Comment:** Revised citation

## Significance

### *What is significant?*

Rotherfield, later known as Sherwood Hall, designed by David C. Askew and built in 1890-91 for Joseph C. and Laura Syme at 14 Hennessy Avenue, Elwood is significant. Rotherfield is a large late-Victorian rendered brick, two-storey, mansion. The 1905 addition, and the additions at the east end made following the conversion of the building to flats in 1943 also contribute to the significance of the place.

Alterations and additions other than specified above are not significant.

### *How is it significant?*

Rotherfield, later Sherwood Hall, at 14 Hennessy Avenue, Elwood is of local historic, representative, and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

### *Why is it significant?*

Rotherfield is historically significant as a mansion built for businessman, Joseph Cowen Syme, a partner with his uncle David Syme, in the Age newspaper from 1878 until 1890. Syme lived at Rotherfield with his wife and family of three daughters and three sons until his death in 1916 at the age of 64; his widow, Laura, lived at Rotherfield until 1925. The mansion is also of historical value in its current use, part of a phase of residential development of Port Phillip where large mansions of the Land Boom were often subdivided into flats from the early twentieth century, and/or their grounds subdivided for more modest residential development and for blocks of flats. (Criterion A)

Rotherfield is of representative value, as an example of the work of architect David C Askew, partner in the architectural firm Twentyman and Askew, key practitioners in Melbourne in the late-nineteenth century. Well-known for his commercial buildings of the Land Boom, which are ornate, and in many respects Mannerist or Baroque in their detailing and forms, Rotherfield is an example of Askew's capability as an architect to apply this design approach to residential buildings. Rotherfield is also of representative value as an example of how this part of Elwood was a desirable location for the homes of businessmen and professionals in the late nineteenth century, in which a number of mansions were built. (Criterion D)

Rotherfield is of aesthetic significance as a fine and intact example of an ornate and well-detailed large Italianate mansion of the Land Boom. Early additions made to the house have not detracted from its character, rather they complement it in terms of their pitched roof forms clad in slate tiles, and arched fenestration. A projecting wing on the south elevation is of aesthetic significance, closing the vista along Wimbledon Avenue. Notable features include its verandah, extending between projecting bays on the south and west elevations. Trabeated bays of the verandah are delineated with Doric and Corinthian pillars, and this overlaid with infills of arcuation in single and three-arch configurations. The arches are supported by cast iron Composite order fluted columns. One bay on the west elevation, on the former front of the house, is bowed in a Baroque-inspired manner. The verandah is also heavily embellished with an array of cement render mouldings that further enhance the composition. Other notable features include its main entrance framed by arched sidelights and a fanlight, arched windows with double-hung timber frame sashes, its slate tile hip roof with pronounced consoles spaced with rendered panels on its eaves. (Criterion E)

At the southeast corner of Rotherfield is a single-storey Modernist addition, which is also faced in render and of a similar paint scheme as the front. This addition is a fine Modernist composition of interconnected cuboid forms, best appreciated when viewed from the southeast, where an exquisite semi-circular profile window, with panels of leadlight coloured glass, is on the side of one of the cuboid masses. (Criterion E)

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## Thematic context

### Victoria's framework of historical themes

6. Building towns, cities and the garden state: 6.3 Shaping the suburbs, 6.7 Making homes for Victorians

### Port Phillip thematic environmental history

5. Buildings and cultural landscapes: 5.2 Shaping the suburbs (5.2.2 Private development), 5.3 Diverse Housing (5.3.1 Mansions and grand villas, 5.3.5 Higher-density housing)

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## History

### Contextual history

Private development in the City of Port Phillip began from the time of the first sales of Crown land in the 1840s and 1850s. The gradual development of infrastructure, including roads, public transport networks and utilities, paved the way for increasing development of private land. Private subdivision within the broad framework set out by Hoddle's survey saw neighbourhoods in the City of Port Phillip grow into populated, thriving communities (TEH).

Mansion estates – large detached homes on generous allotments – defined early, permanent housing in Elwood and St Kilda, in the mid-nineteenth century. Although the oldest surviving houses in Elwood – such as Vautier House, built in the mid-1850s – are terrace houses, it was mansions on large allotments that came to characterise the neighbourhood in its early years. The estates were located in four distinct clusters: St Kilda Hill; the semi-rural estates occupying the high ground on the south side of Dandenong Road from the Nepean Road (now St Kilda Road) to Orrong Road; those surrounding the St Kilda Botanical Gardens and along Brighton Road; and the remote 'sea-side' estates along Ormond Esplanade.

Kearney's 1855 map of the area shows the contrast between dense residential development in St Kilda, and the large mansion estates to the east of the Nepean Road including Charnwood and Marlton, south of Carlisle Street (then known as Beach Road), and on both sides of Brighton Road, including Erindale and Chiverton, and Bramshaw, Osborne House and Wiltonia further south (TEH).

As demand for housing grew, mansion estate subdivisions commenced as early as the 1870s when part of the Charnwood Estate in St Kilda was subdivided to create Charnwood Crescent and Charnwood Grove, where detached villas were erected. The original mansion often survived the first two rounds of subdivision, only to be demolished by the interwar or post-war periods. Those that were retained on much smaller blocks of land were rarely used as single dwellings. Instead, many were converted into boarding houses or flats and this often ensured their survival. Examples include Eildon and Marlton in St Kilda and Rotherfield, Tiuna and Thalassa in Elwood. Others that were demolished are remembered in street names such as Charnwood Avenue, Cintra Avenue, and St Leonards Avenue (TEH).

## Rotherfield

The development of the St Kilda Botanical Gardens from c.1860 led to the surrounding area becoming a desirable residential neighbourhood. By the end of the nineteenth century Blessington, Tennyson, Dickens and Herbert streets were lined with substantial villas, and mansions set in large grounds.

This 45-room mansion, originally known as Rotherfield, was built by contractor Thomas Machin for prominent businessman Joseph Cowen Syme in 1890-91 at a cost of £8,000. David C. Askew of Twentyman & Askew was the architect.

Joseph Syme was in partnership with his uncle David Syme, running the Age newspaper from 1878 until 1890. The relationship ended when David bought Joseph out for £140,000, which financed the construction of Rotherfield during the latter half of 1890 and first half of 1891.

Joseph Syme lived at Rotherfield with his wife and family of three daughters and three sons until his death in 1916 at the age of 64 (*Leader*, 18 November 1916, p.37 'The late Mr. J.C. Syme'). His widow, Laura, was still living at Rotherfield in 1925, but sold the property soon after and had moved to Toorak by 1930.

The 1905 MMBW plan (see Figure 1) shows the house set well back at the end of a curving carriage drive within a large allotment that contained a tennis court, and gravel pathways leading through the gardens. At the rear of the mansion is an outbuilding, possibly stables, with a return verandah that faced onto an asphalted courtyard. This plan does not show the additions that were made to the house toward the end of that year, which added a projecting bay on the south side of the house (BP).

In 1926 the property was subdivided. The mansion was retained on a much-reduced allotment and 15 new building lots were created on the extensions to Hennessy Avenue, which curved around the mansion, and Wimbledon Avenue, as well as along the Tennyson Street frontage (LV). Following this, the address changed to Hennessy Avenue (SM). A succession of occupiers followed and by the mid to late 1930s it was being used for as a venue for various fund-raising parties and balls for Jewish community groups including the Judaen Club and the Jewish Young Mens' Association.

By 1940 it had become the Rotherfield Guest House, and in 1943 it was converted to sixteen flats by the then owner New Variety Chocolate Co. Pty Ltd ('Manufacturers of super luscious chocolate and candy varieties') of 65 Swanston Street, Melbourne. Due to wartime building restrictions, the flat conversion required special permission from the Department of War Organisation. Fifteen of the flats were contained in the mansion itself and one within the outbuilding at the rear. The conversion was achieved by subdividing the rooms of the mansion into a mixture of bedsits and one-bedroom flats with the addition of tiny kitchens and bathrooms (some kitchens were fitted within the large west-facing bay windows, and in one flat the bathroom was contained on a mezzanine level). Only minor external changes were made (BP).

The mansion was shortly after renamed as the Sherwood Hall flats (SM) and further additions were made to the building after World War Two (BP).

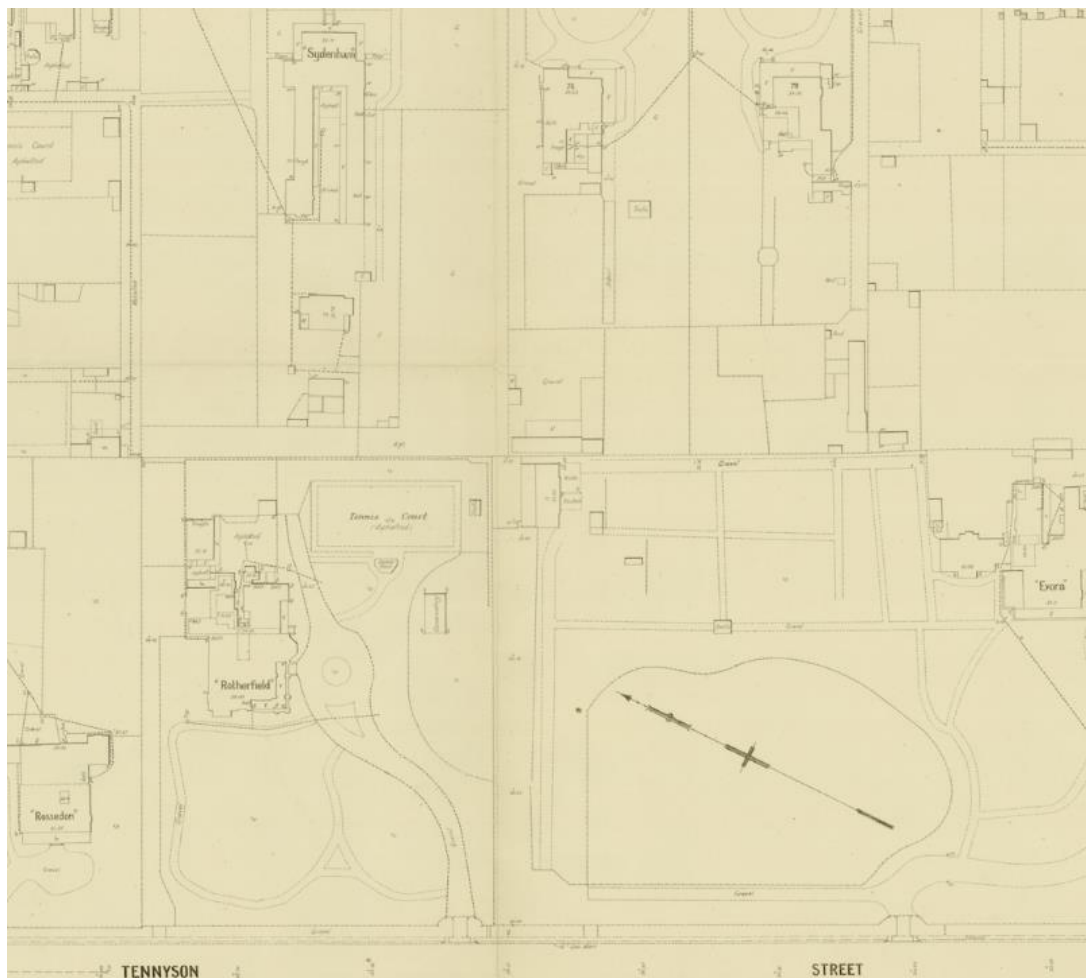


Figure 1: Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works Detail Plan No.1385 (extract) showing Rotherfield and surrounding mansion estates (Source: State Library of Victoria collection)

## References

J.E.S. Vardy, surveyor, 'Plan of the Borough of Kilda' complied under the direction of the Borough Council Hamel and Ferguson, Melbourne, 1873, map number 9 South Ward

Land Victoria (LV), LP 11491

Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Detail Plan no.1385, dated 1905

Port Phillip Thematic Environmental History (TEH) **Version 1, July 2020**

St Kilda Council building permits (BP) nos. 332, 5 October 1905; 10996, 27 September 1943; U.2861, 25 July 1956; 57/1714, 7 April 1961; 1120, 13 January 1966

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 1920-1950

## Description

Rotherfield is a large two-storey, rendered brick, Boom-style mansion, on the north side of Hennessy Avenue. The house was originally set back from Tennyson Street behind a deep garden: that land now alienated from this site by a subdivision where inter-war flats are built. The former front of the house now faces a side setback of the site; and the house now addresses Hennessy Avenue, which serves as its front boundary.

A lawn forms the setback of the house from Hennessy Avenue, with some low bushes in places, allowing for clear views of the house from the street. Mature elms in the east and west side setbacks may be original

garden plantings. A fence of concrete bollards, linked with chains, extends along the Hennessy Avenue frontage. Bollards of this fence flank the entrance to drives that are to the east and west of the house.

Rotherfield is designed in an ornate Italianate-style, representative of the Boom-style, and has a series of hip roofs clad in slate tiles. The roofs project to form eaves with scrolled consoles that are spaced with rendered panels. Rendered chimneys project up from the roofs, and these are embellished with panels, and Classical mouldings. A two-storey verandah, expressed as a loggia, extends between a projecting canted bay on the south elevation and a rectangular bay on the west elevation. A portion of the verandah on the west elevation is bowed on both levels in a Baroque-inspired manner, its visual effect diminished since the elevation now faces the west (side) elevation and the rear of flats in Tennyson Street.

The verandah is vigorously detailed, composed with trabeated bays overlaid with arcuation within each, with single arches and in groups of three. The pillars framing each bay are Doric (rusticated) on the ground floor, and Corinthian on the first floor. The arches are supported by slender cast iron fluted columns in the Composite order on both levels. The columns are supported at their base on the ground floor by chamfered cement rendered pads, and on the first floor supported by a cement rendered balustrade. On the balustrade, cement render balusters extend between each of the arched bays. The house has a deep base, faced in quarry-faced stone, which gives the verandah a slightly elevated effect.

The main entrance to the house is accessed from the verandah on the south elevation, and this part of the verandah is accessed by steps. The entrance is well detailed, with a six-panel timber door, framed by arched sidelights and a fanlight. Scrolled wrought iron/steel railings flank the stairs, and these railings are of twentieth century origin. The windows on the projecting bays and on the walls adjacent to the verandah are arched, timber frame, and have double-hung sashes.

Further along the south elevation, the house has been significantly modified, which has altered the original form of what was originally the rear of the house. Some of this change, includes the removal of a verandah on the south elevation, where a projecting wing with a trio of arched windows was added in 1905. This addition is reasonably sympathetic to the Italianate character of the front of the house. This wing is on axis with Wimbledon Avenue, and closes the vista along that street when looking north.

At the southeast corner of the house is a single-storey Modernist addition, which is also faced in render and of a similar paint scheme as the front. This addition is a fine Modernist composition, which has interconnected cuboid forms, best appreciated when viewed from the southeast. Its Hennessy Avenue elevation is symmetrically composed with a central door with an L-shaped porch, flanked by timber frame Chicago-style windows. The wall projects forward at top, creating a hood. An exquisite semi-circular profile window, with panels of leadlight coloured glass, is on the side of one of the cuboid masses. Above is a deck on the first floor with an entrance with a stepped concrete hood. A stair with a solid concrete balustrade leads from the drive to the first-floor deck.

The mansion is now subdivided into 16 residential flats. Car parking for tenants' vehicles is situated within a row of garages on the northeast corner of the site. Other outbuildings, near the garages, may form early outbuildings of Rotherfield which are shown on an MMBW plan of 1905.

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## Comparative analysis

By the boom of the 1880s, many mansions were built in the Italianate style. These are usually asymmetrical in plan, often with projecting bayed windows and, some, with towers. They feature elaborate cement decoration and two-storey cast iron and/or cement rendered arched verandahs. Surviving examples in the South Melbourne area include Airlie and Ulimaroa in St Kilda Road and Lanark and Netherby House in Queens Road, while in St Kilda and Elwood there are Halcyon, Rotherfield, Ravelston, Tiuna and Thalassa. A variation in the mansion typology of the Land Boom is Bendigonia in Queens Road, which is an unusual example designed in the Picturesque Gothic style (TEH).

Earlier mansions built prior to 1880, by comparison were characterised by more restrained and subtle decoration, and simple, often symmetrical massing.



The mansions were often set within spacious grounds with landscaped formal gardens and were accessed by a carriage driveway. Most included a complex of outbuildings, including stables. Later re-subdivisions resulted in the loss of most original gardens, although sometimes remnant buildings or trees remain on the same or sometimes different lots. For example, while the Hammerdale mansion was demolished, two trees from its once extensive gardens – a palm and a stone pine – survive in the rear yards of houses on the west side of Hammerdale Avenue, St Kilda (TEH).

Rotherfield is an example of the work of architect David C Askew, partner in the architectural firm Twentyman and Askew, key practitioners in Melbourne in the late-nineteenth century. Well-known for his commercial buildings of the Land Boom, which are ornate, and in many respects Mannerist or Baroque in their detailing and forms, Rotherfield is an example of Askew's capability as an architect to apply this design approach to residential buildings.

Rotherfield is also important for its associations with the early residential development of the area surrounding the St Kilda Botanical Gardens. It is representative of the mansion estates that established the character of this area as a desirable residential neighbourhood for the homes of businessmen and professionals in the nineteenth century, in which several mansions were built. Many of these have been demolished (for example, Ascog), or significantly altered and converted to flats (for example, Himalaya at 10 Tennyson Street). Other surviving examples include:

- Hartpury (c.1865, Crouch & Wilson) 9 Milton Street, Elwood (Citation 2098, Individual HO191). Two storey rendered brick with reconstructed cast iron verandah. Converted to flats.
- Wimbledon Mansions (1870), 2 Wimbledon Avenue, Elwood (Citation 2299). Two storey rendered brick, asymmetrical in plan with projecting bay and cast iron return verandah. Converted to flats.
- Whin Bank (1875-76, J.A.B. Koch) 34 Mitford Street, Elwood (No citation). Two storey rendered brick with arched verandah and pediment to the projecting bay. Converted to flats.
- Bundalohn (1884-85, Reed Henderson & Smart) 6 Tennyson Street, St Kilda (Citation 2154, Individual HO269). Less common example in red brick with rendered details. Verandah removed and converted to flats.

Rotherfield is also a fine and intact example of an ornate and well-detailed large Italianate mansion of the Land Boom. Notable features include its verandah, extending between projecting bays on the south and west elevations. Trabeated bays of the verandah are delineated with Doric and Corinthian pillars, and this overlaid with infills of arcuation in single and three-arch configurations. The arches are supported by cast iron Composite order fluted columns. One bay on the west elevation, on the former front of the house, is bowed in a Baroque-inspired manner. The verandah is also heavily embellished with an array of cement render mouldings that further enhance the composition. Other notable features include its main entrance framed by arched sidelights and a fanlight, arched windows with double-hung timber frame sashes, its slate tile hip roof with pronounced consoles spaced with rendered panels on its eaves.

Early additions made to the house have not detracted from its character, rather they complement it in terms of their pitched roof forms clad in slate tiles, and arched fenestration. A projecting wing on the south elevation closes the vista along Wimbledon Avenue and at the southeast corner of the house is a single-storey Modernist addition, which is also faced in render and of a similar paint scheme as the front. This addition is a fine Modernist composition of interconnected cuboid forms, best appreciated when viewed from the southeast, where an exquisite semi-circular profile window, with panels of leadlight coloured glass, is on the side of one of the cuboid masses.

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## Assessment

This place has been assessed in accordance with the processes and guidelines outlined in the Australia ICOMOS *Charter for Places of Cultural Heritage Significance* (The Burra Charter) 2013, using the Hercon criteria.

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## Recommendations

Retain in the Heritage Overlay.

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## Primary source

Peter Andrew Barrett, *H07 Elwood St Kilda Balaclava Ripponlea Precinct heritage review Stage 2: Review of existing heritage citations*, 2021

## Other studies

Andrew Ward & Associates, *City of Port Phillip Heritage Review*, 1998

Robert Peck von Hartel Trethowan, *St Kilda 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural study*, Volume 3, 1992

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## Other images