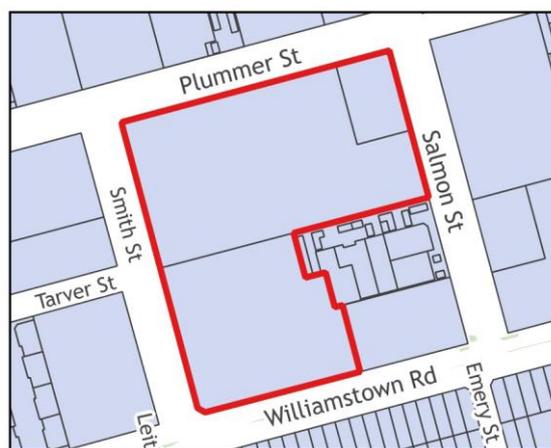


City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place Name: Rootes Ltd factory and Commonwealth Department of Munitions (former)
Other names: Chrysler Australia, Experimental Tank Depot, Department of Aircraft Production Maintenance Division

Citation No:
2366



Address: 19 Salmon Street & 299 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne

Category: Industrial

Style: Interwar Moderne

Constructed: 1945, 1955

Designer: Unknown

Amendment: C143

Comment: Exhibition Version Amendment C143

Heritage Precinct Overlay: None

Heritage Overlay(s): HO472

Graded as: Significant

Victorian Heritage Register: No

Significance

What is Significant?

The former Rootes Ltd factory is a large complex of steel and timber framed, and fibre cement and corrugated iron clad factory buildings located on Plummer, Tarver, Smith and Salmon Streets in Fishermans Bend. The first stage of the complex was constructed initially in the 1940s for the Department of Munitions as an armoured vehicle factory for the war effort, and was then occupied by the Department of Aircraft Production Maintenance Division from 1943 to 1946. In 1946 British car manufacturer Rootes Ltd leased the complex and began manufacturing cars (Hillman, Humber, Singer, Sunbeam, Talbot, Karrier, Commer). The complex was substantially enlarged in the mid-1950s, and later used for manufacture of Chrysler vehicles.

The significant features are the two storey administration and amenities wing with Art Deco elements, large single level sawtooth roof production line buildings, the tall foundry building, parts store and engine plant buildings. The interior of the former administration and amenities wing including all of the original fabric and finishes and the room layout including, on the ground floor, the large square entrance hall, lobby and stairwell and the former typists room, and on the first floor, the former library, board room and telephone equipment room opening off the central corridor.

How is it Significant?

The former Rootes Ltd factory complex is of historical and aesthetic significance at the local level.

Why is it Significant?

It is significant for its association with the top secret Commonwealth Department of Munitions manufacturing programme during the Second World War as the experimental tank depot from 1941 and then the Department of Aircraft Production Maintenance Division from 1943 to 1946. The complex demonstrates the role of wartime manufacturing and the aviation industry which were important in Fishermans Bend in the mid-20th century. (Criterion A)

It is of historical significance as the site of Australian tank design during World War Two, and as one of three major automotive factories established in Port Melbourne and Fishermans Bend in the mid twentieth century in response to growing demand for private motor vehicles and government policy to restrict imports in favour of locally produced manufacture. The complex is notable as the first place in Australia where British-designed vehicles were manufactured, as a direct consequence of government sponsorship and the self-sufficient and protective economic policies of the post-war period. (Criterion A)

It is also significant for the scale and form of the buildings, reflecting both the post war austerity in their design, and the vast spaces needed for vehicle manufacture on production line systems. (Criterion D)

Together with the port, the motor industry sustained the area's working class population residing to the south of the Williamstown Road at Garden City, Port Melbourne, Montague and further afield. (Criterion A)

The office and administration building at the north corner of Salmon and Tarver streets is of aesthetic and architectural significance for the Moderne elements (sometimes referred to as Art Deco) notably the bays of vertical strip windows with fin-like piers, banded corners, flagstaff and integrated clock face. This significance is enhanced by the high degree of intactness, which includes original interior fabric and finishes and room layout. (Criterion E)

Levels of Significance

Primary significance – Buildings constructed up to 1946 including the Salmon Street office block (including the interior) and original sawtooth factory section extending 50m to the east of this block; foundry and 3 bays of original sawtooth factory east of Smith St & south of Tarver St;

Secondary significance – Post 1947 additions including eastern part of Salmon Street block;; two bays east of Smith Street north of Williamstown Road.

No or limited significance – post 1960s additions and internal alterations, window shades, external alterations such as recladding (but not original structural framing).

Levels of significance are shown in Figure 1.



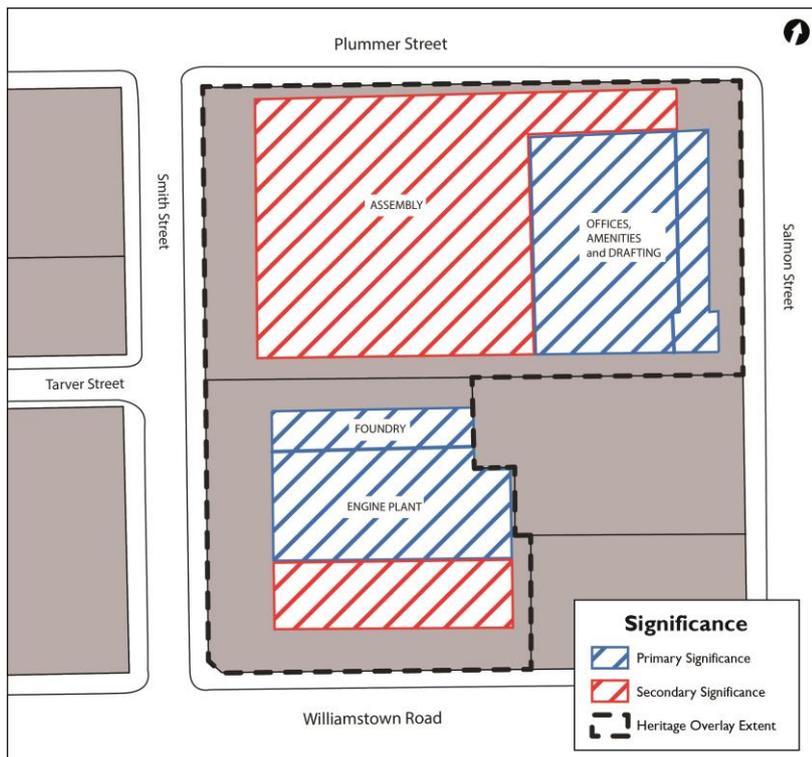


Figure I - Levels of Significance

Thematic Context

Victoria’s framework of historical themes

- 7. Governing Victorians: 7.4 Defending Victoria and Australia
- 5. Building Victoria’s industries and workforce: 5.2 Developing a manufacturing capacity

Port Phillip thematic environmental history

- 5.4 Industry: 5.4.2 South Melbourne, 5.4.5 Growth and prosperity

History

Experimental Tank Works

Early in World War Two, the Australian government commenced a program to establish an armoured division and provide locally made tanks. British artillery officer, Colonel W D Watson, advised the Defence Department from December 1940 and by February 1941, the Australian Cruiser Mark I, tank was designed to a mock-up stage. An experimental tank depot was constructed around July 1941 on a 9½ acre site at Fishermen’s Bend. (Reeves, 2015) However, production was very slow and only a few tanks were built before the local tank manufacturing programme was ultimately stopped in July 1943 in favour of imported tanks from America.

The Department of Aircraft Production (DAP) then took over the factory for expansion of the existing aircraft production in the area at the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation (CAC) works on Lorimer Street, which commenced in 1937, and the Beaufort bomber factory was built on Lorimer Street in 1940. The Salmon St factory became DAP Maintenance Division and then the Maintenance & Disposals Division in

August 1945. At the end of the war it was re-named the DAP Supply & Disposals Branch (and, later still, the Disposals Branch), from where surplus materials were sold off. (Reeves, 2015)

Car Manufacture in Australia

The Rootes car factory had its origins in an incipient local auto industry which developed in the 1920s when a company called Eclipse Motors was established as an importer and distribution company. In the 1930s, it erected a plant at the southern end of Salmon Street, Fishermans Bend, with the assistance of Standard-Triumph and the Victorian Government.

In 1937, the State government and American motor manufacturers were negotiating regarding the establishment of a major automobile factory in Port Melbourne. Three of the four US majors, including both Ford and Chrysler, were considering this option (Courier Mail, 1937) although Chrysler emphatically denied rumors that it was negotiating to start Australian Manufacture. (SMH, 1937)

In 1941, the Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, travelled to Britain to consider collaborative wartime vehicle production. He spent a considerable time with Billy Roote, head of the Rootes Manufacturing Group. (RMG) In January 1946, the Minister for Post War Reconstruction Mr. John Dedman (who succeeded Ben Chifley) announced the establishment of two new industries, one the Bruck silk mills in Wangaratta, and the other the manufacture of cars by the Rootes Ltd in the Fisherman's Bend factory that had previously been used for armored fighting Vehicle production during the war. (Advocate, 1946)

Richard Watney was appointed general manager and initially the factory assembled Hillman Minx vehicles from 1946. This was the first instance of a British motor manufacturer establishing a production line in Australia.

Further expansion of the works was underway within a few years and by 1955, production capacity had increased to 3800 vehicles per year and the work force had grown to 1500.

In December 1965, Rootes Australia Ltd. merged with Chrysler Australia and assembly was gradually moved from Port Melbourne to the latter's existing facilities in Adelaide, South Australia. In 1955 Chrysler had erected the Tonsley Park factory in South Australia, which eventually covered 170 acres. This was subsequently taken over by Mitsubishi and became their main manufacturing works in Australia (Western Herald, 1955) until they ceased building cars in Australia in 2000. Chrysler Australia ceased production of Hillmans in 1973.



Figure 2 – Rootes factory in 1950s looking west, showing recent extensions with light roofs (Source: The Supreme Sunbeam)

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Description

Large factory complex of single level sawtooth roofed assembly buildings and two storey administrative block on Salmon Street. Separate sawtooth roof buildings for the engine plant and vehicle assembly are on the west side of Smith Street north of Tarver Street, which becomes an internal factory road on the

eastern part of the site. The buildings have south-facing welded and bolted steel truss framed and sawtooth-roofed with timber purlins and wall joists, timber steel and some reinforced concrete posts, clad primarily in corrugated asbestos cement sheets. Brick lower walls for impact resistance, support hopper-sash steel-framed windows in continuous bands around most external walls. The interior space is mostly uncluttered by partitions and has reinforced concrete floors throughout.

The two storey office and amenities wing on Salmon Street has a hipped roof of corrugated asbestos sheet and a feature main entrance tower of rendered brick on the south end. This has elaborate brickwork around the main entrance doors and plinth along the lower walls, and vertical window strips above a projecting concrete porch, surmounted by a stylised clock, as well as rusticated quoins to the main bays. Around the corner, the vertical window strips are repeated to double storey height with a finned flagpole above. Matching geometric pattern iron gates on tall brick posts once complemented the building, but have been removed in recent years. Lettering from the former company name 'ROOTES AUSTRALIA LTD' can just be discerned, painted on the roof.

Internally, much of the interior and layout of the former office and amenities wing appears to remain intact. Original fabric and finishes includes architraves, skirtings and door joinery in varnished timber, inlaid parquet floors in a bordered basketweave pattern, plaster walls incorporating moulded panels, cornices and Art Deco style fluted piers, built in furniture such as cupboards in the former board room, and original staircases with either metal railings or solid balustrade with moulded timber handrail and cylindrical newels. Some examples of original light switches, light fittings and door hardware also remain. The ground floor contains a large square entrance hall, lobby and stairwell and the former typists room. These rooms largely remain in their original format. On the first floor, the former library, board room and telephone equipment room open off the central corridor. These three original rooms have been subdivided by partition walls, which could be removed to reveal the original spaces. The library also retains an original skylight.¹

Condition and integrity

Apart from minor internal alterations such as installation of partition walls, replacement of some glazing on the eastern elevation of the main office, replacement of some cladding, overpainting of some windows and the addition of window shades on the north elevations, the buildings are highly intact and in sound condition.



Figure 3 - Rootes main office buildings on Salmon Street

¹ Information about the interior is drawn from *Former Rootes Factory, 19 Salmon Street, Port Melbourne Conservation Management Plan (2016)* and *Rootes Ltd Factory (former), 19-25 Salmon Street, Port Melbourne Heritage Assessment (2015)*

Comparative Analysis

Australian Motor Industries (AMI) was established in 1954 as the successor to the Standard Motor Company, a Melbourne based vehicle assembler for "Rambler" cars and the British "Triumph". This took over the former Felton Grimwade building in Ingles Street around this time and was still there in 1973. It also carried out some finishing operations on "Mercedes Benz" cars and was the first to make a connection with a Japanese manufacturer with a view to assembling Japanese vehicles. The Japanese partner was Toyota, which was ultimately to absorb AMI and continues to occupy the Ingles Street offices and manufacturing plant.

The GMH Fishermans Bend Plant and Ford Geelong, present the car factory as US import, Ford almost certainly being an off-the-shelf design by Albert Kahn. The scale of fibre cement sheeted Art Deco has probably not been matched in any surviving factory building. James Hardy in Brooklyn had a comparable plant including a showroom featuring the whole range of shapes and forms of their product in its design, but has been entirely demolished.

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. The relevant criteria are set out below:

Criterion A: Importance to the course, or pattern, of our cultural or natural history.

Criterion E: Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.

Recommendations

Biosis Pty Ltd, Fishermans Bend additional heritage place assessments, 2015 recommendations:

- Nominate to Port Phillip Planning Scheme with a site specific heritage overlay.
- Retain the primary significant elements which relate to the original Defence Department factory and Rootes car factory dating up to 1946:
 - the two storey Salmon Street office block with main entrance tower,
 - the north and south elevations of the original sawtooth factory section extending for 50m to the east of this block; and
 - the foundry and three bays of original sawtooth factory east of Smith St & south of Tarver Street;
 -
- Retain and adapt representative elements and elevations of secondary significant buildings in any new redevelopment:
 - the Plummer and Smith Streets elevations of the eastern part of Salmon Street block;
 - the two bays east of Smith Street north of Williamstown Road.
- Incorporation of structural elements such as roof trusses and framing, as design and landscape features in future development is encouraged.
- Design future development of the site so that it is informed by the character of the existing buildings including use of sympathetic materials, scale, roof forms and fenestration, and maintain the verticality and reference to former rooflines.
- Maintain existing setbacks from retained parts of the building.
- Prepare an archival photographic and structural drawing record to be prepared and lodged with Port Phillip Council and the State Library Victoria prior to demolition of any buildings or elements.

Primary heritage study

Biosis Pty Ltd, *Fishermans Bend additional heritage place assessments*, 2015

Other heritage studies

Biosis Pty Ltd, *Fishermans Bend Heritage Study*, 2013

Reeves, Simon, 'Rootes Ltd Factory [former] 19-25 Salmon Street, Port Melbourne' – Heritage Assessment, 23 July 2015