

Victorian Heritage Database Report

SKENE HOMESTEAD COMPLEX



Location:

Skene Homestead Road, STRATHKELLAR VIC 3301 - Property No 0120

Heritage Status / Level of Significance:

Stage 2 Heritage Study Complete

Statement of Significance:

What is significant?

The main house at Skene, formerly known as Plains and then as Warrumbeech, appears to date from the late 1850s. It was built for William Skene MLC (1809-1877), one of the most important early pastoralists in the Western District and, by marriage, connected with one of the most important pastoral dynasties in Victoria. He purchased the newly established run after the subdivision of Kanawalla in 1851. Alternatively, the main house may have been built from 1867 while Skene and his family were abroad and after the squatting licence was cancelled. No architect has been associated with the design, although John Shanks Jenkins who designed a new billiard room in 1880 and was active in the area working for clients connected with William and Jane Skene (1816-1895), nee Robertson, may have been responsible for the earlier design. It is one of the most remarkable houses in the Western District because it is not only of two main floors but it has an extensive cellar including a full range of service rooms and a complete attic floor, used as servants' quarters. Substantial outbuildings and working buildings survive from the 1850s, including the very large stone woolshed, some distance from the main house. Men's quarters and other outbuildings associated with the woolshed date from the early 1920s. An extensive landscaped garden and park including a dam intended for ornamental as well as practical purposes complemented the house from its construction. In 1881, William Skene sold to his brother-in-law, John Robertson (1822-1905) and his wife Mary Jane Robertson (1829-1900), nee Carter, who both died at Skene. The property passed to their son, James Robertson (1870-1923) who sold it to his cousin, James Gordon Robertson (1859-1923) in 1919. The latter's wife, Anne Bath Robertson (1859-1835), nee Farrer completed the extensive additions to Skene in 1923. Her son, James Rowland Robertson (1900-1974) inherited Skene when he turned 25 and the property has remained with his descendants since. The whole complex retains an extremely high degree of integrity to its 1923 period and much remains internally from the 1850s period of the house. The condition of different buildings, the garden and the broader landscaping varies but the complex is in very good condition overall.

How is it significant?

Skene Homestead Complex is of historical and architectural significance to the Southern Grampians Shire and to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

Skene Homestead Complex is of historical significance for its direct associations with the very successful pioneering pastoralist, William Skene MLC and his wife, Jane Robertson, its first owners who were responsible for building the main house, its garden, the outbuildings and woolshed. Subsequently, Skene is significant for its continuous ownership by the Robertson family, the central branch of one of Victoria's most important pastoral dynasties.

Skene Homestead Complex is of architectural significance as one of the largest and most complete pastoral complexes surviving in Victoria, including the remarkable main house, its extensive 1923 extension, and its outbuildings, all in the original mid-nineteenth century setting and the woolshed and its outbuildings. The main house is also of significance, through the 1880 billiard room addition, as an example of the work of the important architect, John Shanks Jenkins who may have designed the main house.

Description

All the buildings and the garden are in good condition.

The first house, which perhaps dates from the 1840s and is located to the north-west of the main house, is now

much altered and has not been inspected. Parts of its garden may have been incorporated into the later homestead garden.

The second house is a two-storey building with a substantial and extensive sub-basement level and an extensive attic storey. It is built of bluestone, rock faced but also dressed as architraves and quoins. One distinctive feature is the change in the thickness of the bedding of the bluestone from large beds on the ground floor to small beds on the first floor. There is a simple but sophisticated solid parapet which hides the slate roof. The roof has an octagonal skylight over the hall and a lookout with diagonal timber balustrading. The front doorway is tripartite with a fanlight and is subdivided by stone piers. The door is seven panels. The ground floor windows were standard 12 paned double hung sashes, although a larger modern window, probably in the 1923 alterations has replaced one. There is a bay window on the north elevation, with a small gablet in its parapet, while all other windows are standard 12 paned double hung sashes. The first floor windows and the upper hall door of the facade are French doors. A billiard room, probably designed by J S Jenkins, was added in the 1880s over the basement. A historic photograph taken after the billiard room was added shows another lower single storey building behind and to one side at the rear. Originally the house had a two-storey timber verandah with posts treated as columns, a small breakfront (but no pediment) and diagonal balustrading. Only the upper storey had brackets and a small frieze. The northern end at least was glazed with solid panelling in lieu of the balustrade. The timber verandah and the rear building were demolished for the 1923 alterations and extensions.

The interiors of the main house remain substantially intact for their joinery and plasterwork. The winding staircase is of particular interest for its fine and skilful construction over four storeys. The plaster decoration of the hall ceiling is strongly Classical in its detailing. Also of note is the bay window of the northern room. The opposite room has been modified to link with the 1923 extension. Most of the original mantles, which are simple and typical of the period, survive. The upper floors have simpler detailing with some being modified to accommodate the 1923 alterations. One bedroom appears to have been used as a nursery. There are several small attic rooms, probably used as servants' bedrooms. The basement rooms are strictly utilitarian and include a full suite of service rooms, mostly lit by sub-floor windows. The billiard room, added in the 1880s above the basement and reached by a short flight of stairs from the back passage, retains its original wallpaper and billiard table.

The 1923 alterations and extensions were very substantial and included the new two storey reinforced concrete verandah across the original facade and a single storey verandah around the new hall, drawing room and dining room. The verandah incorporates a tower and pavilions at either end to emphasis the new entrance. The new hall and dining room are lined with stained panelling wainscoting to the height of the internal doors. The drawing room is finished with plaster. Fine leadlighting, typical of the period, is used in the front and internal doors. A shallow bay window in the drawing room extends into the front verandah and a deeper bay window in the dining room extends into the side verandah. Unusually, there is no access from the dining room to the verandah. Throughout the extension the ceilings are elaborate but typical fibrous plaster loosely in a neo-Adam style. Beyond the formal rooms there is an extensive range of service rooms on either side of a central passage, including a kitchen, pantries, an office, rooms for servants and, outside and across the back verandah, meat preparation rooms and a laundry. There is also a verandah on the north side, which links the rooms. This wing superseded the basement service wing, which was then used for storage.

A generator building was built about the same time in the back yard. It is either rendered brick or concrete and has a corrugated iron roof. The early bluestone stables and coach house, L-shaped in plan because of a later brick addition (or conversion) survives some distance from the house. It retains much original detailing including the stalls, trellis in the arched entrances and timber louvres in the windows of the loft above the stalls. There is a tack room with the usual fireplace and chimney at the southern end. A large barn or machinery shed closes the yard on the west side. Another smaller barn closes it on the east side.

Much of the major planting in the main garden survives. The range of planting is typical and probably reflects the early twentieth century as much as the second half of the nineteenth. Early photographs show that there was an extensive orchard on the north side of the main garden, which was enclosed by a hedge, and, beyond the yards of the stables, there were vegetable beds. Beyond the front garden, to the north-east of the house

there is a dam which dates from the earliest times. This may have been for ornamental as well as practical purposes. The remains of a sheep wash survive at its eastern end.

Some distance from the house, there is the shearing complex including the original woolshed and men's quarters and cookhouse. The accommodation buildings have been altered and added to later. The woolshed is L-shaped in plan with low walls mostly of bluestone although there are sections of hardwood weatherboards, painted white, where the height has been increased for the shearing board and yards. The extensive roof is constructed from long poles of eucalypt and is supported by timber posts left in-the-round. The original sawn battens and timber shingles survive under the later corrugated iron. There is a large dormer window high in the main roof and several low level dormer windows. The woolshed has been altered and extended in corrugated iron along the west side and an engine shed has been added onto the north end.

Theme 3. Developing local, regional and national economies

3.5 Developing primary production

3.5.1 Grazing stock

3.5.3 Developing agricultural industries

3.12 Feeding People

3.12.2 Developing sources of fresh local produce

Theme 5 Working

5.8 Working on the land

continuing as a pastoral property

Excellent degree of integrity, especially to the 1923 period.

William and Jane Skene, first owners

John and Mary Jane Robertson, second owners

James Robertson, third owner

James Gordon and Anne Robertson, fourth owner

James Rowland Robertson, fifth owner

J S Jenkins, possible architect for main house

Warrambeech Pre-Emptive Right

Heritage Study / Consultant	Southern Grampians - Southern Grampians Shire Heritage Study, Timothy Hubbard P/L, Annabel Neylon, 2002
Construction Date Range	1858 -
Architect / Designer	
Municipality	SOUTHERN GRAMPIANS SHIRE
Other names	
Hermes number	23435
Property number	0120

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