

Victorian Heritage Database Report  
**FORMER CUSTOMS HOUSE**

---



**Location:**

57 BROUGHAM STREET GEELONG, GREATER GEELONG CITY

**Heritage Status / Level of Significance:**

Registered

**Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number: H1892**

**Listing Authority: VHR**

**Heritage Overlay Number: HO130**

**Statement of Significance:**

What is significant?

The Geelong Customs House was built by Melbourne contractor WC Cornishin 1855-56. The design of the building is attributed to three architects: Clerk of Works for Geelong, William Edward Davidson; Colonial Architect

James Balmain; and prominent Public Works Department architect John James Clark. It is probable that all three were involved in the design, but to what extent remains unresolved. The building replaced two earlier structures: a prefabricated building of c1838 and a stone building of 1845. The Colonial Georgian style Customs House is a three-storey Barrabool freestone and bluestone structure with a slate roof. It housed a bond store in the basement, offices on the lower ground floor and a central long room above. The building served as a Customs House for 140 years.

How is it significant?

The former Customs House has architectural and historical significance to the state of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The former Customs House has architectural significance as an exceptional and elegant example of the Colonial Georgian style. It is characterised by simplicity, plain surfaces, elegant proportions, symmetry and an occasional use of classical detail. The rear of the building has a more Renaissance Revival character with a rusticated basement with a piano nobile over and quoinwork to the corners of the building. The interior has a number of original features and furniture including notable examples of joinery throughout the building, fireplaces, the coved ceiling of the Long Room and the counter. It is also significant as an outstanding example of freestone masonry in Victoria. The building has an unusual architectural expression with a steep fall from front to rear of the site resulting in two distinctive principal elevations: the single storey elevation to Brougham Street and the three storeyed facade facing Corio Bay.

The former Customs House, built on a site associated with customs activities since 1838, has historical significance as a physical expression of the commercial importance of the second most prosperous port in the colony after Melbourne. The scale and impressive design of the building reflect the importance of a busy commercial port which at the height of its activity briefly challenged Melbourne as the principal port in the colony. The building demonstrates the planning principles and level of security required for 19th century customs houses with the secure bond store at the lower level and the Long Room where business was transacted accessible only from the front of the building.

The former Customs House has architectural and historical significance for its associations with its attributed architects. The building is one of the few works that can be associated with Edward Davidson and James Balmain. John James Clark was one of the most prominent and talented architects to work in the Victorian Public Works Department. The building also has associations with builder WC Cornish who was a significant and controversial contractor in Melbourne from his arrival in 1852 until his early death in 1859. Cornish was known for his disputes with trade unions, in particular his refusal to accept the eight-hour day.

Heritage Study / Consultant	
Construction Date Range	1855 - 1856

Architect / Designer	Cornish, WC
Municipality	GREATER GEELONG CITY
Other names	
Hermes number	3853
Property number	

*This place/object may also be State heritage listed. Check the Victorian Heritage Database. For further details, contact the local Council or go to Planning Schemes Online*