



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE*

Villa Carlotta is aesthetically significant as an almost vernacular 'builder's' version of the Federation Queen Anne style widely adopted throughout Australia in the first decade of the twentieth century, and particularly in Western Australia where much building took place following the gold rush. (Criterion 1.1)

The place has a landmark quality created by the tower and the large mature Morton Bay Fig tree on the direct line of the axis of the entrance hall and thus a significant remnant of the original garden plan. (Criterion 1.3)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Villa Carlotta is indicative of changing patterns of residence and social life in Western Australia, as representative of the growth of Busselton when the port town began to develop from a purely regional centre into a holiday resort and retirement town. (Criterion 2.1)

The variety of changing uses of the place, from private home, to convent, school, and holiday accommodation is indicative of the vigorous growth of Busselton and the multiple social and economic factors in its history. (Criterion 2.1)

The place has close associations with individuals, particularly owners and occupants, including its builder Frank Backhouse, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Mission, and the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, who played a part in the history and growth of Busselton. (Criterion 2.3)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

* For consistency, all references to architectural style are taken from Apperly, Richard; Irving, Robert and Reynolds, Peter *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.

Villa Carlotta is valued by the local community as contributing to Busselton's identity and the community's sense of place, and as an element in the current tourism economy, based on the character of the region. It is very well known by the older folk. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

Villa Carlotta is uncommon in the region as an example of a simplified and somewhat awkwardly proportioned vernacular 'builder's' version of the Federation Queen Anne style usually encountered in more elaborate and stylistically refined form. (Criterion 5.1)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

The place is representative of coastal recreational and leisure sites when beach holidays and sea swimming started to become popular with Australians in the 1890s and early twentieth century. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

Villa Carlotta is in sound condition despite some problems with moisture at the time of inspection (June 1997). Operation as a guest house has required a reasonable level of maintenance and as of 1997 the owner-managers are aware that the historic appeal of the place is their best asset, and are keen to retain and enhance its cultural significance.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

The place was originally built as a private home, and later extended to provide convent accommodation, so its return in recent decades to holiday residential use is in some degree compatible with these intentions.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Villa Carlotta has a moderate to high degree of authenticity as changes to the place are obvious but have not destroyed its authenticity. The most recent changes to the visible exterior fabric of the main building such as tile roof, alterations to casements, closure of a skylight in the verandah, and the enclosure of part of the verandah to create sleepouts, are reversible. In many cases, the original fabric (such as verandah post) remain concealed under the superficial changes. The interior changes are more substantial though some would be reversible, but a removed wall and back-to-back fireplace seems unlikely to be reinstated. Most importantly, the overall style and proportions of the main house have been retained despite replacement of original fabric such as the modern tile roof instead of shingles. Recent addition of extra accommodation in the form of detached motel-style rooms beside and behind the old house, and a dining room replacing part of the rear side verandah, have not impacted on its frontal appearance.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentation has been compiled by the Research Institute for Cultural Heritage, Curtin University. The documentary evidence has been compiled by Donna Houston, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by Dr John Stephens, Architect.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Villa Carlotta located at 110 Adelaide Street, Busselton (suburban lot 93), was originally known as 'Ithaca' and was built during 1896-1897.

Villa Carlotta is of unique architectural design and is thought to be representative of the shift in architectural styles that occurred in Busselton around the turn of the century when the town first began to be regarded as a seaside resort as well as an agricultural centre.¹ With the railway service and much improved road conditions, (the Old Coast route had been abandoned in 1860 for the route which is now the present South West Highway), Busselton and the Vasse became more accessible from Perth. It was no doubt this factor, coupled with the general prosperity brought about by the gold booms of the late nineteenth century, that saw Busselton grow into a seaside resort town. The popularity of sea bathing and the fashion for seaside holidays became entrenched in Australia in the late 1890s and the early twentieth century, and was linked to emerging nationalism as is shown by the Heidelberg School art and popular literature.

Villa Carlotta ('Ithaca') was completed in 1897 for Frank Backhouse presumably as a family home for his wife and three children. Frank Backhouse was born in Brisbane in 1863 and came to Western Australia in 1893. He worked as a consulting engineer in Perth for some months before taking on a position with WA Goldfields Ltd., an English company in Coolgardie. The job required that he travel extensively throughout the colony and it was during this time that he built Ithaca and local tradition has it that he built six other cottages in Carey Street, Busselton.²

The property was purchased by the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions in 1904 who converted the house into a convent and school. The house was extended at this time in order to provide additional sleeping space for the convent. The nuns lived in the house and taught classes in a temporary classroom on the property which had been relocated to the present school site in 1951. The Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions transferred the house to the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart on 5 August 1922. The Josephite Sisters took over the convent, school and nineteen boarders.³ In 1951, the Josephite Sisters moved to a remodelled residence in Kent Street opposite the presbytery and church. Prior to being sold in 1952, *Ithaca* was used by the Church as a religious holiday ('Bushies') centre for children and as a holiday house for the Josephite Sisters.

¹ Westrail, *Westrail, A Concise History*, Perth, 1975, p. 6.

² From looseleaf undated anonymous notes found in the Busselton Historical Society collections held in the Busselton Public Library, inspected 23 June 1997, by D. Houston and D. Dolan.

³ 'Out of the Past - No. 12' *The Record*. Thursday 15 January 1976, p. 9.

Over the years, the town of Busselton has undergone economically and demographically driven changes of identity, from a seaport of some significance in the State's economy, to a resort for the goldfields and locally dominant regional centre, and more recently, to a popular retirement place. Such changes frequently cause the re-use of the town's building stock as extant structures are pressed into a variety of successive uses to meet changing needs. *Villa Carlotta* was one such building in Busselton to be used for a number of purposes.

The property was sold to a Mr Rushton in 1952 and it is believed he renamed the house *Villa Carlotta*. Mr Rushton ran the property as a private hotel. Documentary evidence suggests that *Villa Carlotta* has changed owners several times up to the present; however, further research is required as the information appears to be contradictory. The current owners took over the property in 1995 and have added significantly to it. The present owner of *Villa Carlotta* is Troy Buswell who runs the property as a guest house.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The first building on the site was the house (Ithaca) in 1896-97. In 1904 the house was extended and used as a convent and boarding school for girls. Subsequent additions and alterations have revolved around the property's function as a guest house.

Sited in a domestic suburban landscape (Sub Lot 93 on approx 3,920m² of land), the building stands in well tended gardens containing a number of large established trees. The house is clearly seen from the road and is approached via a circular drive. The main building comprises the original home, the convent and subsequent additions. Other buildings on the block on the site (see fig. 1) are residential units associated with the guest house function. This building is very recent and is not included in this assessment.

The main building comprises the original 1896-97 house, the 1904 convent, a number of framed extensions and a new brick dining room. The form of the original home is discernible in fig. 2 and can be seen in the external fabric of the place. This home was a one-storey building with a two level tower over the entry.

The tower is framed construction on the upper level and clad on three sides with horizontal timber boarding. Decorative timber 'quoins' are applied at the corners of the tower. On the north face of the tower boarding has been replaced with asbestos cement sheet. The original rectangular timber window frames on this level have been replaced with aluminium. The lower level is in stretcher bond brick construction finished in white tuck-pointing. Windows are oval timber ringed with tuck pointed headers and arched run mould to the head of the window. The tower is roofed with dark grey 'alu-tile'.⁴ However it appears that the original pitch (approx 45°) and roofing timbers have been maintained.

⁴ Alu-tile was an aluminium roof covering profiled to resemble terra cotta tiling – popular in the 1970s.

Fabric of the 1897 house is clear on the east and west where little change has taken place to the form of the building, apart from the 1904 convent additions to the west. Original tuck-pointed brickwork in stretcher bond is maintained at the entrance and to the verandah on the east and west. The floor of the verandah has been replaced with new brick paving but the verandah timberwork is intact. Windows to this verandah area (serving rooms 6 & 8) have been replaced with aluminium frames. Each of these windows also has timber louvred shutters which possibly date from the original home. The National Trust report of 1976 mentions that these windows were French doors – it is possible that the aluminium windows date from this time. There are two entry doors. These are the major entrance on the east, which is framed by a gabled breakfront to the verandah and a door on the west, which serves the passage (room 7 fig. 2). Both doors are set in frames with geometric patterned leadlight sidelights and coloured sheet glass fanlights. Both door surrounds are very similar and given the geometric pattern leadlight and the manner of the timberwork, it is highly likely they are original fabric. Inspection of the fanlight reveals that it is unlikely that the sheet glass replaces earlier leadlight.

The whole roof has been covered with grey 'alu-tile', however the close spaced battens for the original shingle roof remain and are clearly visible on the underside of the verandah roof. The roof gable to the south-east of the roof retains decorative timberwork lost to the two gables on the north.⁵ Chimneys serving fireplaces in rooms 1 and 2 are intact. The chimney to room 6 has been added at a later date – probably 1960s.⁶

The verandah to the south-east has been subsumed in alterations to provide bedroom accommodation. It is possible that some original verandah fabric remains beneath this alteration. Tuck-pointed brickwork is clearly visible and intact but coated with PVA paint throughout this area.

The style of architecture best fits Federation Queen Anne exhibiting an asymmetrical plan, complex roof form, tower, and wide verandah with decorative timber posts and brackets.⁷ The brackets are simple but rustic (geometric) in character.

The 1904 additions were placed on the west, possibly replacing some of the verandah. The extent of the remaining fabric of this extension is clear on fig. 2. Although the north face of this extension is ashlar inscribed cement rendered, it is probable that this face was originally tuck pointed as the east wall adjacent to the verandah is tuck pointed and the join between render and pointing suggests render is a later application. Ashlar inscribed render is also found on most of the west wall where not hidden by the west extensions. The symmetry of the north wall of the 1904 additions is over balanced by an addition in weatherboard to the west. Windows to the

⁵ These were probably removed sometime after 1976 as a photo of the building taken at this time for National Trust assessment clearly shows timberwork on these gables. (National Trust assessment - *Villa Carlotta*).

⁶ Conversation with the owners 9 June 1997.

⁷ Apperly, Richard; Irving, Robert and Reynolds, Peter *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.

north wall are intact. The same inscribed render can be seen above the roofline of the 1904 additions on the west wall of the 1897 building.

The 1904 building detracts from the rest of the building, mainly because of the painted render although it is an essentially clumsy addition. The style is generally in keeping with the older building.

Planning is quite organic following the various additions to the building. The exact progression of stages is unclear but the probable sequence is: the 1897 house, 1904 conversion and extension, weatherboard clad rooms to the west, infill of the verandah to the south east and the new guest lounge. Of most importance for this survey are the original house and the convent additions.

The entry and entry hall to the 1897 home is intact and shows clearly the status of the home and owner as belonging to the nineteenth century upper middle class. The space is generous and embellishments are not over-powering. A feature of this space is a timber staircase leading to two levels of the tower. Floors to the tower are jarrah and ceilings are deal matchboard. The stairs appear to be mostly jarrah to all levels.

Rooms 1 and 2 may have originally been living areas as they were connected by an opening, which (from remaining hinge marks) appears to have been closed by a large folding door. Room 6, which is now a dining room, was originally two separate rooms with a fireplace serving both areas (see fig. 2).⁸ The existing fireplace was probably added when the dividing wall was removed – this might have been around 1968.⁹

Room 8 is used as a bedroom and appears to be intact. Room 5 is now a large commercial kitchen with little indication of previous utilisation.

Ceilings to rooms 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 appear to be plaster lath construction. Cornices in these rooms are run plaster of a similar pattern and quite fine. Doors, architraves and other timberwork have been stripped – these would have been originally painted.

Rooms 12, 13, 14 and 15 form part of the 1904 convent additions and are basically intact except for room 15 where the timber window sash has been replaced with aluminium. Ornamentation is much simpler in this area than in the older 1896-97 portion. The fabric of rooms 10 and 11 - included in the 1904 convent additions – display little evidence of past use. At present they form the male and female toilets. It is probable that these rooms originally formed an ablution area. A cellar has been constructed under room 12 and probably dates from 1904. Access is from room 12 and it is ventilated from an opening in the north side at ground level.

Despite various building accretions to the main building block and the introduction of new buildings to the site, the original fabric can be clearly understood. Enough original fabric from 1896-97 and from 1904 remains to demonstrate previous functions and use.

Overall, the condition of the building is good. The original form of the 1896 and 1904 buildings can be clearly seen midst the various additions and alterations. It is possible that superfluous fabric, such as the weatherboard

⁸ The wall and fireplaces can be traced in the ceiling of this room.

⁹ Conversation with the owner on 9 June 1997.

extensions to the west and the enclosed verandah to the east, could be removed without a great deal of trouble. The roof is in reasonable repair although the alu-tile is aesthetically detracting. Brickwork is fretting on the tower and on the east and north sides of the verandah. It is probable that fretting of brickwork on the verandah is caused by the new verandah paving trapping moisture against the building walls. The cellar under room 12 floods occasionally, which may in time add to deterioration of the fabric.

13.3 REFERENCES

National Trust of Australia (WA) assessment of *Villa Carlotta* 1976.

13.4 FURTHER RESEARCH

Little information has been found concerning *Villa Carlotta's* builder, Frank Backhouse, or subsequent owners and changes to the place, indicating an opportunity for further research. Neither public records nor local sources provided much information on the place during its occupation by the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions and the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart. Research into Church archives could improve knowledge and understanding of the use of the place during their ownership. Further research on recent owners and changes to the house could also be undertaken.