

# Chapter Four

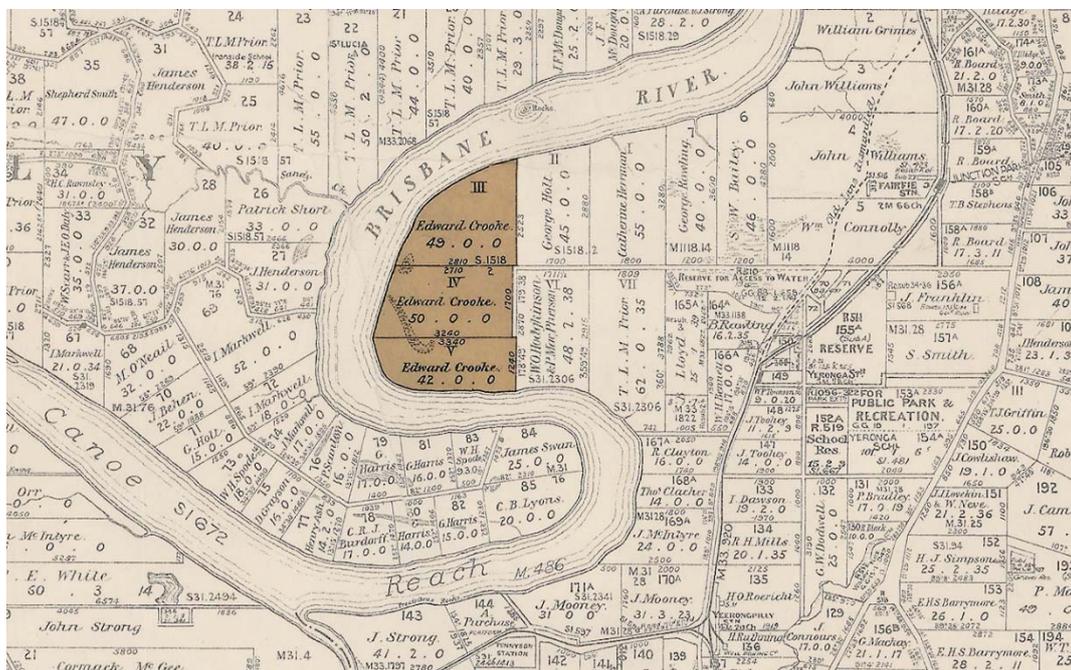
## The Yeronga Military Hospital: a conservation bungle

Peter Marquis-Kyle<sup>1</sup>

This is a short account of a Second World War women's army hospital, and what happened on the site before and after. To me, it is also a story of the failure of a system that is meant to protect places of cultural significance.

### The villa Rhyndarra

The land was surveyed and sold by auction in Brisbane by the New South Wales government around 1854. Edward Crooke bought three suburban allotments in Yeronga, a total of 141 acres (57 hectares), with a long Brisbane River frontage, about 5 km from the centre of the town.<sup>1</sup>



Three suburban allotments purchased by Edward Crooke in the 1850s, 40-Chain Series, Brisbane, Department of Public Lands, 1919

The land was later bought by William Williams, a businessman involved in shipping, insurance and property development. In 1888 Williams engaged the architect Andrea Stombuco and his son Giovanni to design a house to suit. Building was completed in 1889 and described in the *Brisbane Courier*.

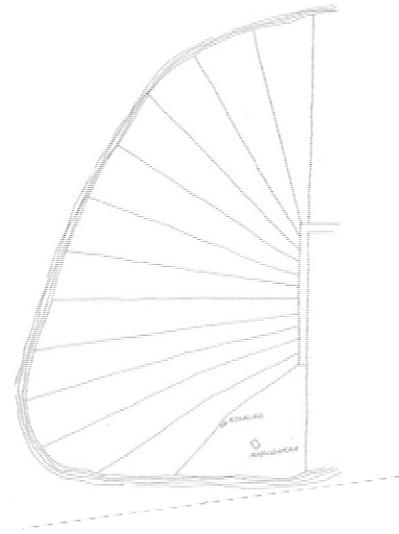
A large villa residence of two stories, built of stone and brick, has just been completed at Yeronga for Mr. W. Williams, at a cost of about £3200. The building is situated on the riverbank, but the frontage is towards the Oxley Plains, and is carried out in the Tuscan order, with bold details. The sides, back, and part of the front are surrounded by wide verandas and balconies, with curved roofs, and these are supported by Corinthian columns at close intervals, the space between the pedestals and caps being filled in with lattice and ornamental cast-ironwork. The ground floor is divided by a hall 60 ft. by 10

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ft. All the rooms are large and lofty, and the majority of the apartments in the main building are furnished with elaborate marble mantel pieces, while the ceilings are decorated with centre flowers and broad cornices. The whole of the rooms on the ground floor are tastefully decorated in oils, a main staircase leads from the hall to the first floor, where bedrooms and other apartments open on either side of a wide corridor. The kitchen, servants' quarters, a dairy, storeroom, &c, are detached from the main building, and further off still are situated the stables and outside offices. Messrs. Stombuco and Son were the architects, and the building reflects credit on their skill. The contractor was Mr. R. Smith, and the work of decoration was carried out by Messrs. Lang and Co.<sup>2</sup>

Williams called the villa *Rhyndarra*. There he bred horses and established a dairy farm and enjoyed a prosperous way of life with his children and extended family.<sup>3</sup> But the prosperity did not last. In the early 1890s came economic depression, falling property values, droughts and floods. Williams came close to bankruptcy, but was able to have his affairs 'liquidated by arrangement, and not in insolvency' in 1896.<sup>4</sup> His horses and cattle were auctioned straight away.<sup>5</sup> The Australian Mutual Provident Society (AMP), as mortgagee, took possession of *Rhyndarra*. Williams's unsecured creditors received a final dividend of sixpence in the pound in 1900.<sup>6</sup> After the market recovered the AMP subdivided the land at Yeronga into thirteen lots, each with river and road access, which were offered for sale in 1907.<sup>7</sup>

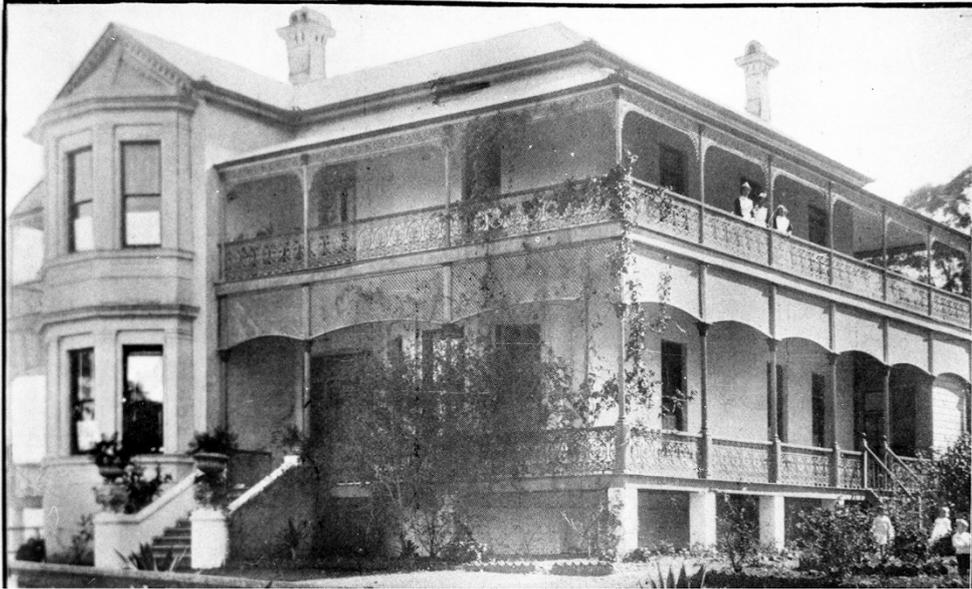
A sketch plan of property subdivided for sale by the AMP Society in 1907 into thirteen allotments. The *Rhyndarra* villa and stable is on the southernmost lot.



### **The Salvation Army home for girls**

In 1897 *Rhyndarra* was leased by the Salvation Army and set up as a home for orphaned and endangered girls.<sup>8</sup> In 1907 the church bought the house and the twelve acres of land around it and made some minor adaptations.<sup>9</sup> Folding doors between the large drawing and dining rooms on the northern side of the house were removed and rows of beds were installed. The former sitting room, across from this dormitory was furnished as a dining room. Other rooms upstairs were also used to accommodate the girls; the staff, including a matron, cooks and a teacher, lived at *Rhyndarra* as well.

The original stable behind the house was converted for use as a schoolroom. A teacher was employed by the Salvation Army who taught the younger girls. Older girls attended state schools in the surrounding suburbs, or helped milk the cows, or were employed in the work room where they learned needlework and other tasks. The older girls also helped look after the younger ones. Vegetables were grown in a kitchen garden, and pigs, chickens, cows and horses were kept in the yards.<sup>10</sup>



A photograph of *Rhyndarra* from the Salvation Army's 1915 booklet, *Repairers of the Breach: a pictorial account of social work of the Salvation Army throughout the Commonwealth of Australia*. SLQ, image 187617

The annotation to this photograph in the booklet referred to above stated:

A BLESSED and sacred spot to many young girls who in the hour of orphanhood or danger have been taken into the arms of love and maternal care. Highly appreciated by Brisbane and South Queensland. Accommodates 60. Already passed through 214.



Photograph of the front of the house, Source unknown

The number of residents at the orphanage fluctuated over time with changing circumstances. Most of the girls who came to *Rhyndarra* were orphans, or children whose parents were not able look after them and others had run away from home. In 1899 about 30 girls, ranging from 6 to 16 years of age lived in the villa and<sup>11</sup> in the early 1900s only 18 girls were in residence.<sup>12</sup> During the depression years in the 1930s about 60 or 70 girls lived at the house.

In 1938 an extension to the kitchen at the back of the house was built using government funds. This two-storey extension, constructed of timber and masonry, had a recreation hall upstairs, and bathrooms and toilets downstairs.<sup>13</sup>

Life at the girls' home continued during the first years of the Second World War. In September 1941, the Salvation Army held a garden party and fete in the grounds, as a part of a war-related fund-raising appeal.<sup>14</sup>

### **The 2nd Australian Women's Hospital**

In 1942, as Japanese military forces advanced across the Pacific and the Americans joined the war, there were big changes on the Australian home front. The staff and inmates of the girls' home were moved elsewhere, and *Rhyndarra* was taken over by the Australian Army for use by the 2nd Australian Women's Hospital (2AWH). As a distinct medical unit 2AWH had been established, 'under canvas' in the grounds of the 214 Australian General Hospital (AGH) at Redbank. However by 1942 there was room for only about 50 patients at 2AWH at Redbank, so a larger facility was needed. 2AWH moved to Yeronga as a complete unit late in 1943.<sup>15</sup>

The unit's role was to provide medical treatment for personnel of the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) who, by 1944, numbered more than 20,000 women. It was one of three such units—the others were based in Sydney (1AWH) and in Perth (3AWH).

Construction of the 2AWH buildings was organised by the Allied Works Council (AWC), formed in early 1942 to coordinate the massive building of infrastructure required to fight the war as it came closer to Australia. £35,334 was available for the project. Building works were carried out by the Commonwealth Department of Public Works, and the roadworks were completed by the Queensland Main Roads Commission. Plans for the hospital had already been prepared by AWC architects and construction was expected to take four months.<sup>16</sup> The buildings were finished around the end of 1943 and the first group of staff arrived by about December to prepare the hospital for patients.<sup>17</sup> The annual report for the AWC noted the completion of the hospital, and the report included this description:

Erected on a pleasant hillside bounded on two sides by a bend in the Brisbane River, this hospital provides accommodation for 160 female patients. Covered ways link up all the wards with kitchens, operating theatre and admission building. The hospital is well equipped with the usual operating theatre and ancillary buildings including pathological, laboratories, canteen and administration units.<sup>18</sup>

The villa was the preserve of the officers; sleeping huts were built for the other ranks.



The 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Women's Hospital in 1945. Note the 1880's villa in the distance behind the flagstaff. [Australian War Memorial, accession 086787]

### **Temporary housing**

In 1945 the war ended and demobilisation began. The 2AWH was disbanded after the last patients had recuperated and were discharged. Various government agencies lobbied to use the *Rhyndarra* property—the Department of Social Services wanted to use the property as a centre for civilian rehabilitation, the Immigration Department wanted it as a centre for European migrants, the Health Department was keen and so was the Queensland Housing Commission.

The Housing Commission won this tussle, briefly. There was an acute housing shortage after the war, a shortage of building materials, and money was not readily available to buy or build homes. People lived with relatives, married couples lived with in-laws and verandahs were enclosed to create sleep-outs. Families applied to the Housing Commission for accommodation and were placed in homes where possible. To ease the housing shortage, from the late 1940s and into the early 1950s the hospital buildings at Yeronga were used for temporary accommodation for homeless people. Slight alterations were made to the wards and other buildings at Yeronga to house these people, though everything was not laid on, and residents had to make do. People were just happy to have a roof over their heads. For example, one family had to build a partition to form a private area within one of the wards. They sheeted the partition with 3-ply, and even had to supply their own materials.<sup>19</sup>

### **An army hospital again**

Compulsory national service training was reintroduced by the commonwealth government in 1951 and the Yeronga site was re-occupied by the Australian Army. The northern part of the site became known

as the Northern Command Personnel Depot. The southern part became a hospital for national service recruits and trainees, known as the National Service Training Hospital, and later as 1 Camp Hospital, then as 1 Military Hospital, Yeronga.

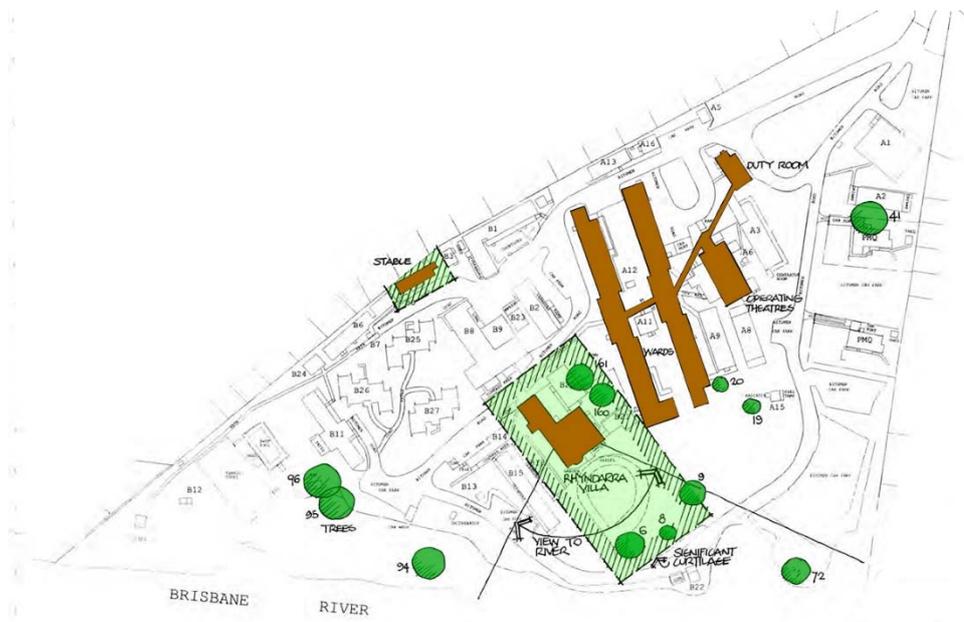
The functions and facilities on the site were altered in stages but the physical evidence of the various historical layers remained. By the mid-1990s the hospital was deemed ‘no longer suitable’, and plans were made to build a new hospital at Enoggera. The site was ‘surplus to requirements’ and the Department of Defence prepared to dispose of it.

### Defence sells the site

Disposal of such a site needed care. It was a large and valuable land holding, in an established residential area. It was also a place of cultural significance—the historical significance of *Rhyndarra* had been recognised as early as the 1930s.<sup>20</sup>

The conservation of historic places became an increasing concern in Australia in response to the large-scale redevelopment of cities after the war. The heritage conservation movement grew strongly through the 1960s (when the National Trust of Queensland was established), the 1970s (when the Australian Heritage Commission was established), and the 1980s as public pressure in Queensland eventually led to the enactment of the *Queensland Heritage Act 1992*.

*Rhyndarra* was listed in the commonwealth Register of the National Estate in 1978.<sup>21</sup> When the Department of Defence decided to sell the property the department was required by the *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975* to ensure that *Rhyndarra*’s cultural significance did not come to harm. This requirement prompted the department to commission my office to investigate the significance of the place. We produced an initial report in 1995,<sup>22</sup> and a more detailed one in 1996,<sup>23</sup> and contributed to discussions with the commonwealth and state agencies about the transfer of responsibility for heritage protection.



Plan showing the site in 1996, with significant buildings, trees and areas marked. (Yeronga Military Hospital: Heritage Conservation Study)

In short, we reported that the cultural significance of the place extended to the whole twelve-acre site and included the 1940s women’s hospital buildings as well as the 1880s villa and stable buildings. Our reports explained the historical value and rarity of some of the hospital buildings (backed up by historical research and analysis) and their social value (supported by consultation with women who had connections with the place). We outlined possible future uses for the site that would allow the significant buildings to be adapted and retained.

Our assessment was accepted by the Australian Heritage Commission, and incorporated in the Register of the National Estate.<sup>24</sup> In preparation for the impending sale of the property by the commonwealth, the Queensland Department of Environment and the Queensland Heritage Council prepared an entry in the state heritage register.

After this work was done the Department of Defence offered the site for sale by public tender, with full disclosure of its heritage status, and the clear implication that the significant hospital buildings should be conserved. This was a responsible action on the part of the department, in line with its obligations under section 30 of the *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975*. It meant that the market value of the property was less than it would have been if there were no heritage obligations attached to it.

### Residential subdivision

A sale proceeded. The purchaser of the site applied in May 1997 to the Queensland Heritage Council (which, at that time, was responsible for approving development of places in the heritage register) for approval to demolish all the hospital buildings, and to subdivide the land around the villa into 36 residential allotments. The applicant argued that there was “no prudent or feasible alternative” to the demolition. The heritage council considered the application, which was accompanied by consultants’ reports, letters of support from the Brisbane City Council and local residents, The National Trust opposed the application.<sup>25</sup>

The Queensland Heritage Council decided to approve the demolition of the hospital, and the subdivision of the land around *Rhyndarra* and the stable. In my view this was a poor decision that resulted in the loss of a significant remnant of our wartime heritage, and probably a windfall financial gain to the private developers at the cost of the commonwealth.



The area originally entered on the Queensland Heritage Register and the reduced area currently on the register (shaded area): Based on the Department of Environment and Science maps

The heritage council later reduced the area of land on the heritage register to a fraction of the land that was originally listed. Now only three parcels of land are on the register: These include an 824 m<sup>2</sup> lot that incorporates the 1880s stable and is now the site of a new house; an 4,128 m<sup>2</sup> lot around the 1880s villa with the 1930s addition; and the land between the front of the villa and the river that is a part of the riverside park land.

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### Endnotes

- 1 “Domestic intelligence: sale of crown lands” *Moreton Bay Courier*, 18 February 1854, 2, records the purchase by Edward Croke of 42 acres at Yeerongpilly, which corresponds to the area of Allotment V on which *Rhyndarra* was later built. The 40-chain cadastral map of the area (Brisbane: Department of Public Lands, 1919) shows Edward Croke as the original purchaser of Suburban Allotments III, IV and V.
- 2 *Brisbane Courier*, 18 May 1889, 5.
- 3 For a biography of William “Willie” Williams (1833–1915) see <https://bit.ly/3fHpL3g>
- 4 “Meeting of creditors,” *Brisbane Courier*, 24 July 1896, 4.
- 5 Auction notice, *Brisbane Courier*, 11 July 1896, 12.
- 6 Legal notices, *Brisbane Courier*, 3 October 1900.
- 7 “Sale of Rhyndarra estate,” *Brisbane Courier*, 23 March 1907, 3.
- 8 Salvation Army, *Repairers of the breach: a pictorial account of the social work of the Salvation Army throughout the Commonwealth of Australia* (Melbourne: Salvation Army, 1915).
- 9 Entry in the Queensland Heritage Register for *Rhyndarra*, place 600360.
- 10 *War cry*, 23 September 1899.
- 11 *War cry*, 23 September 1899.
- 12 *Queensland parliamentary papers*, 1910, Volume 2, 623.
- 13 *War cry*, 23 July 1938.
- 14 “Fete at Yeronga for self-denial appeal,” *Telegraph*, 20 September 1941, 9. See also “The Salvation Army: self-denial appeal: red shield and general work outlined,” *Border Watch* (Mount Gambier, SA), 3 July 1941.
- 15 Information from the late Professor Lesley Williams, University of Queensland, recorded in Peter Marquis-Kyle and others, *Yeronga Military Hospital: heritage conservation study* (Brisbane: Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle Architects, 1996), note 29.
- 16 Australian Archives (Queensland), BP 111, AWC minutes.
- 17 Oral history interviews with AAMWS personnel who worked at 2AWH, in September 1996, recorded in the *Yeronga Military Hospital: heritage conservation study*.
- 18 Australian Archives (Queensland) — CA 967 Works and Services Branch BP 26212 — correspondence files, 1940-1950, 9127 Part 3, report for work undertaken to June 1944, folio 29.
- 19 *Yeronga Military Hospital: heritage conservation study*, 25.
- 20 Florence Eliza Lord, “Brisbane’s historic homes: LXXXIII: Rhyndarra”, *Queenslander*, 12 November 1931, 35.
- 21 The Register of the National Estate is no longer in effect, having been replaced by a new registration scheme by the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. An archival record of the 1978 registration of *Rhyndarra* is available at <https://bit.ly/2NaPZiD>
- 22 Peter Marquis-Kyle and others, *1 Military Hospital Yeronga: heritage strategy: a report for the Department of Defence on cultural heritage conservation issues* (Brisbane: Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle Architects, 1995).
- 23 *Yeronga Military Hospital: heritage conservation study*.
- 24 See the archival record of the Register of the National Estate from 2000: <https://bit.ly/2UVICQn>
- 25 Queensland Heritage Council papers, released in accordance with the *Right to Information Act 2009*.