South Australian HERITAGE COUNCIL

BETTER HERITAGE INFORMATION SUMMARY OF STATE HERITAGE PLACE

COMMENTARY ON THE LISTING

Description and notes with respect to a place entered in the South Australian Heritage Register in accordance with either the South Australian Heritage Act 1978 or the Heritage Places Act 1993.

The information contained in this document is provided in accordance with s14(6) and s21 of the Heritage Places Act 1993.

REGISTERED Attic House **PLACE NO.:** 12633

NAME:

ALSO Former Attic House

KNOWN AS:

ADDRESS: Bunganditj Country

18 Victoria Street

Robe SA 5276

CT 6160/655 F205532 A186 Hundred of Waterhouse

CONFIRMED IN THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE REGISTER:

28 November 1985

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

Built in 1869 for tailor William Trail McLean, Attic House demonstrates the commercial growth and plateau of Robe during its heyday as a key South Australian seaport town during the 1850s and 1860s. As a tailor's store and residence, it also demonstrates one of the main ways clothing was produced in South Australia prior to the advent of factory production and mass manufacturing.

INDICATIVE CRITERIA (under section 16 of the Heritage Places Act 1993)

(a) it demonstrates important aspects of the evolution or pattern of the State's history

Built in 1869 for tailor William Trail McLean, Attic House was one of several commercial properties established along Victoria Street in Robe between the 1850s and 1860s. McLean, a Scottish migrant, had grown his tailoring business in Robe during the 1860s, before building his new store in 1869. The business lasted until the mid-1870s, when McLean and his family relocated to Adelaide to take over a clothing factory. His brief proprietorship and departure for new opportunities elsewhere is reflective of Robe's decline as a major seaport during the 1870s. Attic House thus demonstrates the commercial growth and plateau of Robe during its heyday as a key South Australian seaport town.

As a tailor's store and residence, it also demonstrates one of the main ways clothing was produced in South Australia prior to the advent of factory production and mass manufacturing later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. McLean's tailoring business appears to have been a small-scale operation. Clothing would have been individually tailored to suit local demand. By contrast, by the turn of the twentieth century, McLean's clothing factory in Adelaide employed about sixty people to mass produce clothing.

SITE PLAN

Attic House PLACE NO.: 12633

18 Victoria Street, Robe



Attic House, 18 Victoria Street, Robe SA 5276, CT 6160/655 F205532 A186, Hundred of Waterhouse.

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LEGEND

Parcel boundaries (Indicates extent of Listing)
Outline of Elements of Significance for State Heritage Place

Physical Description

Attic House is a single-storey, gambrel-roofed, limestone shop. The roof contains an attic. An adjoining dwelling on the western side, with a hipped roof is also built of limestone.

Additional features include:

- pitched verandah to northern side of shop, with corrugated steel spandrels, timber posts and scalloped fascias,
- verandah to northern side of adjoining dwelling, contiguous with hipped roof,
- stone plinth to shop verandah,
- large timber-framed, multi-pane shopfront window with prominent muntins,
- front door with glazed upper section,
- multi-pane casement window on the eastern side of the attic,
- timber casement and sash frames to other window openings,
- stone chimneys.

Elements of Significance:

Elements of heritage significance include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- Attic House,
- adjoining structure (the attached dwelling),
- aambrel-roof,
- casement window on the eastern side of the attic,
- large timber-framed, multi-pane shopfront window with prominent muntins,
- pitched verandah to northern side of shop, with corrugated steel spandrels, timber posts and scalloped fascias,
- stone chimneys.

Elements not considered to contribute to significance of place include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- Non-original extensions at the rear,
- Verandah on the attached dwelling,
- Picket fence,
- Non-original fixtures and fittings.

History of the Place

Clothing production in Colonial South Australia¹

During the first few decades of colonial settlement, most early South Australian residents produced their own clothing or purchased items second-hand. Buying new clothes was a practice limited to wealthier people or reserved only for special occasions. Much of this was because individual items had to be handmade by skilled artisans, which was typically a costly process due to the time, labour and materials expended.1

The production of clothing was gendered. Seamstresses made clothing for women and tailors made clothing for men. The latter were 'skilled in all aspects of the making of men's clothing by hand and to order'. Tailors were also a 'part of a labour "elite" with wages of 12s to 15s per 10-hour day, 6-day week'. 2 By comparison, mechanics earned between 5 to 6s per day, while labourers earned about 25s per week, or 3 to 4s per day. Seamstresses made less than their tailor counterparts but appear to have earned more than many other female workers.3

Along with bootmaking, tailoring was 'conducted in Workmen's homes or in small shops' and by 1860 'small-scale shop production dominated tailoring'. ⁴ Tailors often employed 'journeymen' or apprentices to assist them.⁵

This mode of clothing production was disrupted in the mid-1870s due to the introduction of the sewing machine. As historian Jude Elton notes:

The sewing machine ... enabled the mechanisation of clothing work and mass production of items. Clothing sizes and styles became standardised, rather than "tailor-made" to individual measurements and taste. It became unnecessary for one tailor or tailoress to follow through all stages of making an article of clothing. Instead, labour was subdivided, with various machinists each sewing only one part of a garment before passing it on to another for further assembly. Cutting and pressing were also separated out for other workers to do. Newcomers ceased to learn a whole trade. Entry requirements, apprenticeships and access to clothing occupations were transformed.6

Ultimately, while mechanisation and mass manufacturing started to make new clothing more affordable and accessible, it also began to make skilled tailors and seamstresses largely obsolete. By the end of the century, many were reduced to fabric 'cutters' in factories, while women without tailoring skills or experience were employed en masse to produce ready-made items for men and women.⁷

¹ This section draws from Jude Elton, 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade' (paper presented at Changing Places: Changing Lives, State History Conference, Adelaide, August 2008), pp.1-8. BHI Summary of State Heritage Place: 12633 Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 28 November 1985

Establishing Colonial Robe

Guichen Bay in the South East of South Australia forms part of the traditional lands of the Bungandidj people, who have been present in the area for at least 30,000 years.⁸ Europeans first charted the coastline of the region in 1802 during the Baudin and Flinders expeditions and sealers established a presence at Guichen Bay in 1831.⁹

European exploration of the South East took place from 1839 and settlement began as early as 1840.¹⁰ Much of the South East was initially settled by pastoralists and by 1847 approximately half of the region was held under pastoral licences. As primary production expanded the colonial government began to provide a series of government towns as service and staging centres. The provision of ports to ship goods to market was also viewed as essential and Robe was established in 1846, to provide a port for the burgeoning wool clip then being obtained from the South East.¹¹ Robe was officially declared as a port by the government in 1847.¹²

Situated towards the south of Guichen Bay, the town at Robe (or Robetown) went on to become the first major town of the South East. 13 Robe became the administrative centre of the region when a Government Resident was appointed in 1846. 14 Over the next two decades, Robe developed as an international port that serviced the local wool industry and import and export markets. It also facilitated the arrival of thousands of immigrants, including English, Scottish and Irish people, as well as Chinese prospectors during the Victorian gold rush. 15

William Trail McLean and 'Attic House'

In November 1859, William Trail McLean and Margaret Muirhead McLean arrived in South Australia with their five children aboard the William McIver. ¹⁶ Originally from Aberdeen, Scotland, William was a tailor by trade and had embarked to the colony as an assisted passenger. ¹⁷ Shortly after their arrival, the McLeans relocated to Robe and were established residents by the early 1860s. ¹⁸

While it is unknown precisely why William and Margaret chose to first settle in Robe and conduct business there, it is highly likely they were attracted by the commercial growth and development taking place in the town during the late 1850s. ¹⁹ It is equally probable they were drawn by the Scottish presence in Robe and the South East generally. ²⁰ Demonstrating both aspects, the Caledonian Inn (SHP 12368) on Victoria Street had been erected in 1859 by Peter McQueen, a Scottish migrant.

William established a tailoring business in Robe during the 1860s. He is listed as a tailor in Josiah Boothby's *Almanac and Directory* for 1865.²¹ The *Advertiser* noted decades later that William operated a 'business as a tailor and clothier for about 14 years' while in Robe, which roughly constitutes the entire period he and his family lived there.²²

On 29 September 1868, William purchased allotment 9 of Section 218 of the Village of Lordston,²³ a suburb of Robetown, the original township surveyed by the government

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in April 1846.²⁴ Lordston, or Lordstown, was one of several 'villages' (suburbs) established around Robetown in the mid-1850. These villages, including Honeyton and Syleham, had been subdivided from pastoral land to facilitate the growth of the township and followed the 'line of commercial development along Victoria Street, thus extending the town from its original compact plan'.²⁵ Victoria Street had originally been a 'bullock track into Robetown' but had become a major commercial centre by the 1860s.²⁶

Either in late 1868 or early 1869, William went on to build what is now known as Attic House on his new allotment. Reporting on 'Country Building Improvements', including in Robe, the *Express and Telegraph* noted on 23 January 1869 that 'Mr. McLean has had erected a tailor's shop in Victoria-street, showing a good front'.²⁷ The shop included an upper storey, or attic, used as a workroom. It is thus probable that the first floor was used to showcase and transact wares and the attic to produce them. Historians Kathleen Patitsas and Carolyn Wigg observe that its 'window, which gives a view over much of the eastern part of the town, no doubt gave good light for the work from early in the morning'.²⁸

A dwelling was attached to the western side of the shop, presumably built simultaneously so the McLean family could live at the premises. Such an arrangement would not have been unusual, as similar combined structures had been built throughout Robe, including Wilson's Saddlery (SHP 12644) on Victoria Street and Campbell's Store and Cottages (SHP 12542) on Smillie Street. Indeed, the combination of commercial and residential premises was typical for small businesses throughout South Australia.²⁹

By the time William had erected his new shop, he had already established himself as an important and respected figure in Robe. He was appointed as the chairperson of the Robe Institute in the early 1860s and throughout the decade had been a senior figure within the Loyal and Independent Order of Oddfellows, an international fraternal society with a strong presence in Robe and the South East.³⁰ As a 'Post Provincial Grand Master (PPGM)' of the Order, he addressed the Governor of South Australia, James Fergusson, during his visit in 1869.³¹ Later that year, William was one of the first five residents of Robe to be elected to the new District Council.³²

William was also a friend of the famous horseman and poet Adam Lindsay Gordon.³³ According to legend, William tailored a suit for Gordon's pet kangaroo, which it apparently wore while 'dancing' on the 'back of one of Gordon's horses', to entertain visitors, including the Governor in 1869.³⁴

William remained with his family in Robe until around 1874. As of 1 January 1874, he is still listed in Boothby's Almanac and Directory as a tailor in Robe.³⁵ The following year, he is listed as a 'cutter' living in Adelaide.³⁶

William had been employed as manager for Messrs. Goode Bros' clothing factory, which he and his sons later took over renaming the business Messrs. McLean & Co.³⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, the company employed about sixty workers, almost entirely women.³⁸ In 1892, William was called to speak as a witness before the Shops and Factories Commission, which was tasked with investigating labour conditions in the clothing industry,³⁹ and resulted in the *Factories Act 1894*, which sought to regulate industrial relations.⁴⁰ Whatever the conditions were like at Messrs. McLean & Co., William had kept up with and participated in the transformation of clothing production in South Australia.

Attic House after Robe's Heyday as a Seaport

William's departure from Robe coincided with its decline as a major colonial seaport and its transition to a 'quite country village'.⁴¹ Its decline began early in the 1870s owing to various factors, but was primarily due to concerns about the renewal of pastoral licenses, the rise of competition from other port towns, such as Kingston, and the emergence of railways in the region.⁴² Reflecting this downturn, the population dwindled from about 600 residents in the late 1860s and early 1870s to 170 in 1891.⁴³ While William almost certainly relocated to seize a new business opportunity, the decreasing commercial activity at Robe no doubt helped influence his decision to leave the town and community he had come to be an important part of for well over a decade.

On 4 January 1875, Attic House was transferred to Andrew Dunn, a sheep farmer, effectively bringing Attic House's time as a tailor's store to an end.⁴⁴ Dunn's ownership was brief, and Attic House has since had many owners, including William John Backler, the son of Thomas Backler, one of Robe's 'oldest and most respected residents'.⁴⁵ Despite minor alterations and the addition of several extensions, it has remained essentially the same since it was first constructed in 1869. It was confirmed as a State Heritage Place on 28 November 1985.

Chronology

Year	Event
1840	European settlers begin to populate the South East.
1846	Counties of Grey and Robe are proclaimed by the colonial government and are opened to claim under pastoral license.
	The Government of South Australia establishes Robe as the administrative centre of the South East.
1847	Over half of the South East is settled under pastoral license.
	Robe is officially gazetted as a port by the government.
1859	William Trail McLean and his family arrive in South Australia aboard the David McIver/McIvor.
1868	William Trail Mclean purchases allotment 9 of Section 218 of the Village of Lordston, a suburb of Robe Town, on 29 September.
c.1869	Attic House is built for William Trail McLean.
c.1869 c.1874	Attic House is built for William Trail McLean. McLean and his family leave Robe for Adelaide.
c.1874	McLean and his family leave Robe for Adelaide.
c.1874 1875	McLean and his family leave Robe for Adelaide. Pastoralist Andrew Dunn purchases Attic House.
c.1874 1875 1897	McLean and his family leave Robe for Adelaide. Pastoralist Andrew Dunn purchases Attic House. William Trail McLean passes away. Attic House is confirmed as a State Heritage Place on 28 November,

References

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Reports and Theses

- Dallwitz, John, and Marsden, Susan. Robe Historical Interpretation Study: Stage 1 in the Establishment of the Robe Historical Interpretation Centre. Adelaide: Department of Environment and Planning, 1983.
- Patitsas, Kathleen, and Wigg, Carolyn. 'History and Sources' in 'Dwelling ("Attic House"), Victoria Street, Robe', Item Evaluation Sheet, Heritage Conservation Branch, 1983, 6823-12633.

Conference Proceedings

Elton, Jude. 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade'. Paper presented at Changing Places: Changing Lives, State History Conference, Adelaide, August 2008, pp.1-8.

Newspapers

- 'The Business of a City. No. 9: Messrs. J. T. McLean & Co.', Mount Barker Courier and Onkaparinga and Gumeracha Advertiser, 2 July 1897, p.3.
- 'Country Building Improvements', Express and Telegraph (Adelaide), 23 January 1869, p.3.
- 'District of Robe' Evening Journal (Adelaide), 29 October 1869, p.3.
- 'The Governor's Visit to the South-East... The Road to Robe', Evening Journal (Adelaide), 14 June 1869, p.3.
- 'Guichen Bay', South Australian Weekly Chronicle (Adelaide), 4 October 1862, p.3
- 'Guichen Bay', South Australian Weekly Chronicle, 11 July 1863, p.2.
- 'Miscellaneous News', Advertiser (Adelaide), 28 January 1897, p.6.

'Opening of the New South-Eastern District M.U. of Oddfellows', Adelaide Observer, 11 April 1868, p.14.

'Robe', Narracoorte Herald, 2 December 1902, p.4.

'The Shops and Factories Commission. Ninth Day', Evening Journal (Adelaide), 5 May 1892, p.3.

Archival

Passenger List for the David McIver, Liverpool to Adelaide, Arrived 28 November 1859, Passenger Lists 1845-1940, State Records of South Australia, 6/1859.

Land Titles

Certificate of Title Vol. 120, Folio 92.

Websites

André, Roger. 'Wool', SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia, 19 March 2014. https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/subjects/wool Accessed 5 March 2024.

SITE DETAILS

Attic House PLACE NO.: 12633

18 Victoria Street, Robe

FORMER NAME: Backler's Shop

DESCRIPTION OF PLACE: A limestone shop building featuring a large attic with

a double-pitched roof and an attached dwelling with

a hipped roof.

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION: c.1869

REGISTER STATUS: Identified: 29 August 1983

Provisionally entered: 21 February 1985

Confirmed: 28 November 1985

LOCAL HERITAGE STATUS:

CURRENT USE: Commercial premises, 1869 – (intermittent)

PREVIOUS USE(S): Dwelling, 1869 – unknown (intermittent)

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

AREA:

District Council of Robe

LOCATION: Street No.: 18

Street Name: Victoria Street

Town/Suburb: Robe

Post Code: 5276

LAND DESCRIPTION: Title CT 6160/655 F205532 A186

Reference:

Hundred: Waterhouse

PHOTOS

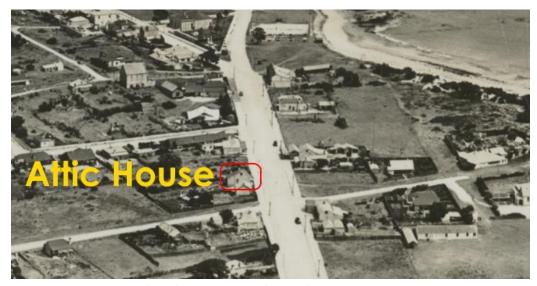
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18 Victoria Street, Robe



Attic House, then known as 'Backler's Shop', c.1900.

Source: SLSA B 18551



Victoria Street showing Attic House, c.1940.

Source: SLSA 41275

18 Victoria Street, Robe



Front of Attic House showing shopfront and attic window, c.1980.

Source: DEW Files



Front of Attic House showing shop and attached dwelling, c.1980.

Source: DEW Files

18 Victoria Street, Robe



Southern and eastern elevations of Attic House, c.1980.

Source: DEW Files



Eastern elevation of Attic House showing attic window, c.1980.

Source: DEW Files

18 Victoria Street, Robe



Attic House, c.2007.

Source: DEW Files



Front of Attic House showing shop and attached dwelling, September 2023.

Source: Google Street View

18 Victoria Street, Robe



Western elevation of Attic House, September 2023.

Source: Google Street View



Attic House, September 2023

Source: Google Street View

¹ Jude Elton, 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade' (paper presented at Changing Places: Changing Lives, State History Conference, Adelaide, August 2008), p.1.

- ² Elton, 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade', p.1.
- ³ Elton, 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade', pp.1-2.
- ⁴ Elton, 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade', p.1.
- ⁵ Elton, 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade', p.1.
- ⁶ Elton, 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade', p.3.
- ⁷ Elton, 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade', p.4.
- ⁸ Liz Harfull, Almost an Island: The Story of Robe, reprinted edition (2013; Mile End: Wakefield press, 2015), 12-14; Susan Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days (Robe: District Council of Robe, 1985), pp.11-12.
- ⁹ Harfull, Almost an Island, p.11; Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days, p.12.
- ¹⁰ Harfull, Almost an Island, pp.14-16; Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days, p.14.
- 11 Roger André, 'Wool', SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia, 19 March 2014. https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/subjects/wool; Michael Williams, The Making of the South Australian Landscape: A Study in the Historical Geography of Australia (London; New York: Academic Press, 1974), pp. 339-341.
- ¹² Dallwitz and Marsden, Robe Historical Interpretation, pp.4-10.
- ¹³ Dallwitz and Marsden, Robe Historical Interpretation, pp.4-10.
- ¹⁴ Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days, pp.21-24.
- ¹⁵ Dallwitz and Marsden, Robe Historical Interpretation, pp.10-16.
- ¹⁶ Passenger List for the *David McIver*, Liverpool to Adelaide, Arrived 28 November 1859, Passenger Lists 1845-1940, State Records of South Australia, 6/1859.
- ¹⁷ Passenger List for the David McIver, 6/1859.
- ¹⁸ In September 1862, William McLean was one of several men elected to a committee in Robe to advance the political concerns and interests of the district. 'Guichen Bay', South Australian Weekly Chronicle (Adelaide), 4 October 1862, p.3. The following year, he also became the 'Chairman' of the Robe Institute Committee. 'Guichen Bay', South Australian Weekly Chronicle, 11 July 1863, p.2.
- ¹⁹ See Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days, pp.26-30 and Harfull, Almost an Island, pp.36-41.
- ²⁰ See Harfull, Almost an Island, p.70; Leith MacGillivray, 'Pastoralism' in The Wakefield Companion to South Australian History, eds. Wilfred Press, Kerrie Round and Carol Fort (Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2001), pp.402-404; Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days, p.33.
- ²¹ Josiah Boothby, The Adelaide Almanack, Town and Country Directory, and Guide to South Australia for 1865 (Adelaide: C. Platts, E. S. Wigg, J. Howell, and W. C. Rigby, 1865), p.100.
- ²² 'Miscellaneous News', Advertiser (Adelaide), 28 January 1897, p.6.
- ²³ Certificate of Title Vol. 120, Folio 92.
- ²⁴ Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days, p.20.
- ²⁵ Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days, p.20.
- ²⁶ Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days, p.20.
- ²⁷ 'Country Building Improvements', Express and Telegraph (Adelaide), 23 January 1869, p.3.
- ²⁸ Kathleen Patitsas and Carolyn Wigg, 'History and Sources' in 'Dwelling ("Attic House"), Victoria Street, Robe', Item Evaluation Sheet, Heritage Conservation Branch, 1983, 6823-12633.
- ²⁹ This is reflected by the 237 State, Local and 'contributory' places listed in the South Australian Heritage Register.
- ³⁰ See 'Guichen Bay', 11 July 1863, p.2 and 'Opening of the New South-Eastern District M.U. of Oddfellows', Adelaide Observer, 11 April 1868, p.14.
- ³¹ 'The Governor's Visit to the South-East... The Road to Robe', Evening Journal (Adelaide), 14 June 1869, p.3.
- ³² 'District of Robe' Evening Journal (Adelaide), 29 October 1869, p.3; Patitsas and Wigg, 'History and Sources'.
- ³³ Patitsas and Wigg, 'History and Sources'.
- ³⁴ Harfull, Almost an Island, p.70.

³⁵ Josiah Boothby, The Adelaide Almanac and Directory for South Australia, 1874 (Adelaide: J. Williams, 1874), p.163.

- ³⁷ The Business later became 'Messrs. J. T. McLean & Co.' following William's death. 'Miscellaneous News', 28 January 1897, p.6; 'The Business of a City. No. 9: Messrs. J. T. McLean & Co.', Mount Barker Courier and Onkaparinga and Gumeracha Advertiser, 2 July 1897, p.3. ³⁸ 'The Shops and Factories Commission. Ninth Day', Evening Journal (Adelaide), 5 May 1892,
- ³⁹ 'The Shops and Factories Commission', 5 May 1892, p.3.
- ⁴⁰ See Elton, 'Tailor-made to Sweated Trade', pp.7-8.
- ⁴¹ Marsden, A Glimpse of Golden Days, pp.46-48; Harfull, Almost an Island, p.42.
- ⁴² Dallwitz and Marsden, Robe Historical Interpretation, pp.19-21.
- 43 Harfull, Almost an Island, p.42.

p.3.

- ⁴⁴ Certificate of Title Vol. 120, Folio 92, transfer no. 60738.
- ⁴⁵ 'Robe', *Narracoorte Herald*, 2 December 1902, p.4; Certificate of Title Vol. 120, Folio 92, Transfer 334112.

³⁶ Josiah Boothby, The Adelaide Almanac and Directory for South Australia, 1875 (Adelaide: J. Williams, 1875), p.183.