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**WHYALLA COURT HOUSE**

**C20 20**

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**Place Name and Address:** Whyalla Court Housel  
3 Whitehead Street  
Whyalla SA 5600

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**SUMMARY OF HERITAGE VALUE:**

**Description:**

The Court House is a striking two storey red brick building in Modern style with some Art Deco influence. It occupies a prominent site in the centre of Whyalla, facing parkland.

**Statement of Heritage Value:**

The Whyalla Court House is significant both as a major building from the development of Whyalla during the industrial expansion of the Second World War, and as an interesting and rare example of the early buildings of the Modern movement in South Australia.

**Relevant 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 as an exemplar of the public facilities necessary for the industrial development of wartime Whyalla
  - (d) It is an outstanding representative of a particular class of places of cultural significance, early Modern buildings in South Australia
  - (e) It demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic or technical accomplishment in its early application of Modern design principles and Art Deco ornament to a court house building
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**RECOMMENDATION:**

It is recommended that the Whyalla Court House be provisionally entered in the South Australian Heritage Register.

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**ASSESSMENT OF HERITAGE VALUE:**

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

In the face of wartime emergency, the population of Whyalla boomed from a few hundred in 1938 to 7,500 at the end of 1945. Attracting workers in the middle of a war was not made easier by the fact that Whyalla was a raw and primitive settlement on the edge of the desert. Therefore, BHP and the State government cooperated to supply community facilities and rental housing to make living conditions in Whyalla as attractive as possible. While the rest of the country was starved of construction materials, Whyalla had a building boom. The Savings Bank and Whyalla Hospital (1940) and the Spencer (1939) and Bay View (1941) hotels in the main street were all built in the first two years of war. Reflecting a second order of priorities, in 1943 the Court House and Whyalla Technical High School both opened. (There had been a traditional relationship between alcohol and law enforcement in new settlements since the nineteenth century; a court house usually followed soon after hotels were built.) All were attractive and stylish buildings, the two hotels and the Court House fine examples of the Modern/Art Deco style. (Stanley 2004, pp. 137-139)

The Court House formed part of this building boom in the rapidly growing town. There was already a single-storey Police Station on the corner of Whitehead Street and Darling Terrace, built in the 1920s. It was upgraded and a new two-storey Court House was built beside it, forming a police and justice complex in the town centre. The construction of the buildings is poorly documented, but they appear to have been completed in late 1943 and opened for business by early 1944. (Early documentation of the Whyalla Court House seems to have been lost, as there is nothing in State Records about its construction, and the DTEI Plan Room references begin with alterations to the building from 1969 onward.) There has been major internal refurbishing of the building over the decades, but relatively little alteration to its external appearance.

**(d) It is an outstanding representative of a particular class of places of cultural significance as an early Modern/Art Deco styled court house**

The rapid development of wartime Whyalla made it an ideal environment in which to experiment with modern architectural styles. The distinctive Whyalla Court House was not completed until two years after both the two Art Deco hotels had been completed, but it was still roughly contemporary with the completion of those better-known early Modern buildings in Adelaide, the Bank of New South Wales and Deep Acres apartments.

A photograph of the completed Court House published in the *Whyalla News* in 1945 shows that there has been little major alteration to its exterior since construction. A counsel room was added as an infill to a return in the facade in 1988, and has subsequently been fitted with a verandah.



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**(e) It demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic or technical accomplishment as a striking composition in the Modern idiom**

The Whyalla Court House is a startling building in the context of South Australian architectural history. Traditionally, court houses had been built in one of the formal Classical styles, the precedent set by the crisp Doric of the Magistrates Court in 1850 and reinforced by the Roman Doric of the Police Court in 1866 and the Ionic of the Supreme Court in 1869, followed by the muted symmetrical classicism of a dozen country court houses. Whyalla was the first substantial new town to be established since the nineteenth century, and it was a long time since anyone had designed a court house. The colonial architectural precedents had become anachronistic, but normally we might have expected a Georgian or Stripped Classical essay to have been thought appropriate. The uncompromising Modernism of the Whyalla Court House is completely unexpected. Pubs, town halls and picture theatres may have been free to experiment with the new modernism, but court houses had traditionally been above such racy experimentation.

The building's facade is asymmetrical, dominated by a strong two-storey entrance portico - almost lofty enough to be called a tower - with the ground floor doorway recessed within it. This is a device familiar from classical architecture, but looks entirely novel when presented in the stark geometry of Modernism. Above the entrance are the words "Court House" in a plain *sans serif* font which still looks modern today. The building has the Modern vocabulary of corner windows, cantilevered concrete eaves, and a composition broken into brick bands with strong emphasis on horizontals and verticals. Its repetition of geometric forms teeters on the brink of Art Deco playfulness. In common with most early Modern buildings in South Australia, the Court House has a conventional timber-framed hipped roof, concealed from street level view behind a tall parapet.

The most surprising thing is that such a frankly Modern building presents itself as almost entirely of red brick. The Modern movement favoured bland rendered surfaces, avoiding emphasis on traditional building materials. In Whyalla, the reality was that BHP had a large brickworks, and red bricks were cheap locally, whereas concrete was rationed and expensive, as well as more demanding in construction. The terra cotta colouring of the building was to become even more appropriate as blown iron ore dust and smelter smoke turned much of Whyalla the characteristic brick red of ferric oxide over the next few decades, but that is unlikely to have been a consideration as early as 1943.

**REFERENCES:**

*BHP Review*, June 1944

Danvers Architects, *Heritage of the Eyre Peninsula*, 1987

Peter Stanley, *Whyalla at War*, 2004, pp. 137-139

DTEI Plan Room

Photographs at Whyalla National Trust Museum

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**SITE RECORD:**

**FORMER NAME:** n/a

**DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:** Two storey brick masonry building in Modern style, on prominent site facing parkland

**DATE OF COMPLETION:** 1944

**REGISTER STATUS:** **Description:** n/a

**CURRENT USE:** **Description:** Court House  
**Dates:** 1944-2008

**PREVIOUS USE(S):** **Description:** n/a  
**Dates:** n/a

**ARCHITECT:** **Name:**  
**Dates:** n/a  
n/a

**BUILDER:** **Name:** n/a  
**Dates:** n/a

**SUBJECT INDEXING:** **Group:** Law & enforcement  
**Category:** Courthouse

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA:** **Description:** City of Whyalla

**LOCATION:** **Unit No.:** -  
**Street No.:** 3  
**Street Name:** Whitehead Street  
**Town/Suburb:** Whyalla  
**Post Code:** 5600  
**Region No.:** 12  
**Region:** Eyre Peninsula

**LAND DESCRIPTION:** **Title Type:** CR  
**Volume:** 5753  
**Folio:** 848  
**Lot No.:** T 560508 A187  
**Section:** -  
**Hundred:** Randell

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**SITE RECORD (Cont.):**

**AMG REFERENCE:**

**Zone:** 53  
**Easting:** 0741436  
**Northing:** 6342055  
**Map Sheet:** 6431 Whyalla  
**Map Scale:** 1:100,000

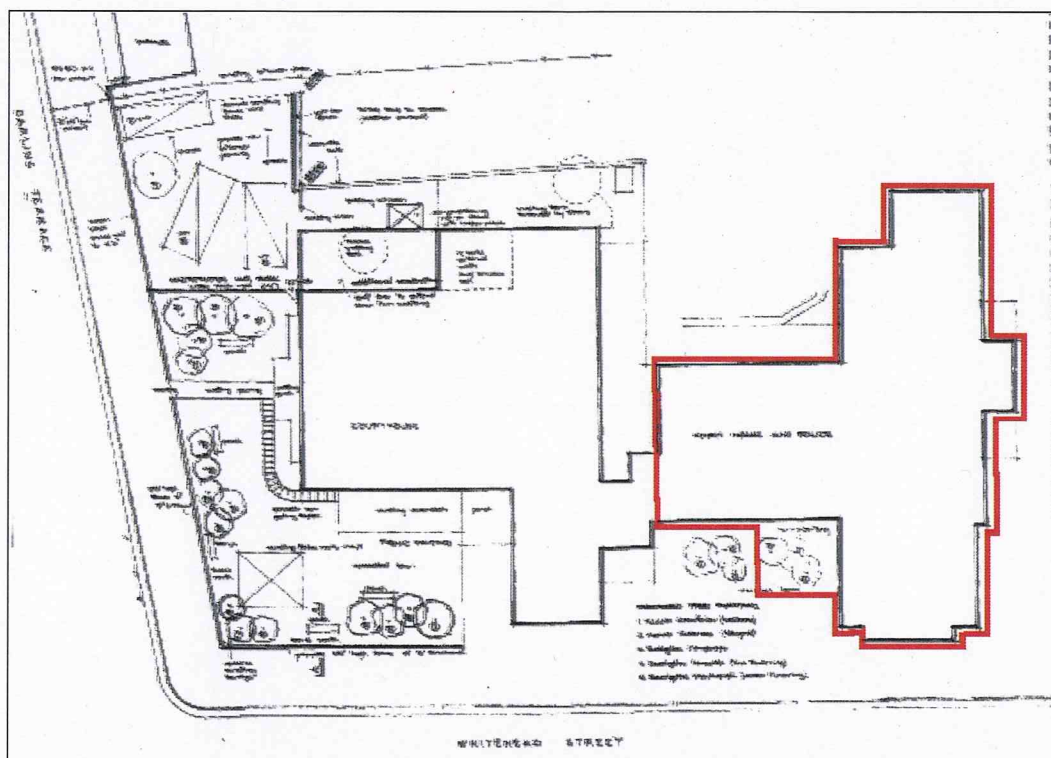
**OWNER:**

**Name:** Chief Secretary  
**Address:** GPO Box 464  
**Town/Suburb:** Adelaide  
**Post Code:** 5001

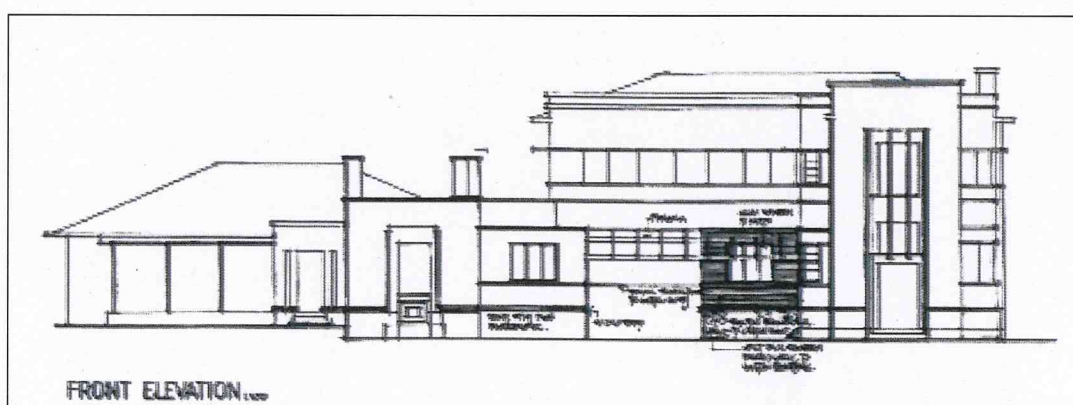


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Plan of Whyalla Court House and Police Station, 1972 - proposed Heritage Place outlined in red (DTEI Plan 137-AR-72)



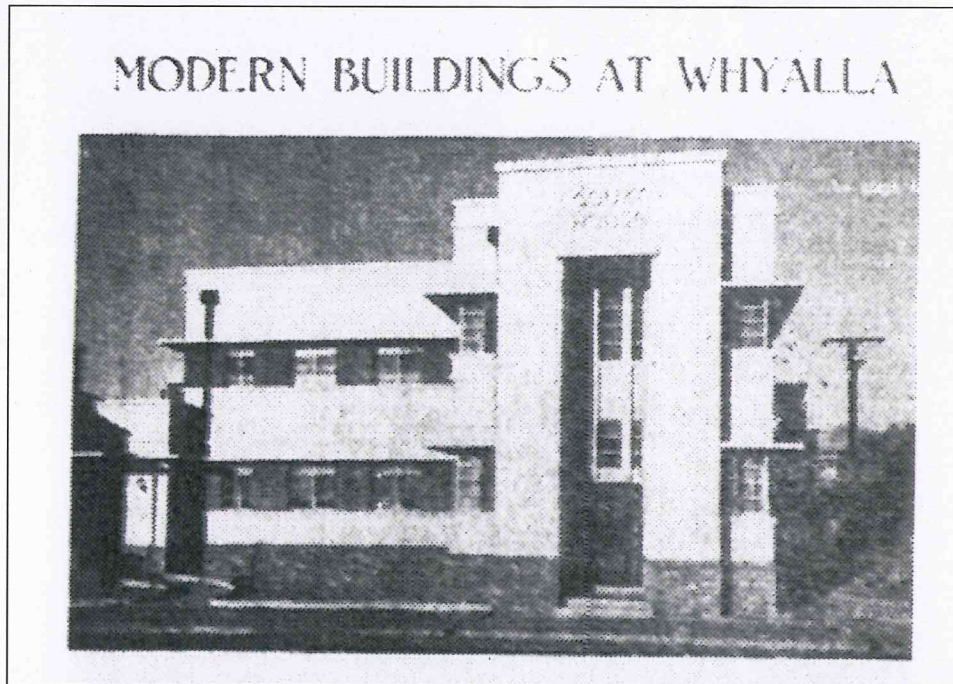
Extensions to Whyalla Court House facade , 1988 (DTEI Plan 469-WB-88)

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New Court House in *Whyalla News*, 1945 (Stanley 2004, p. 138)



Whyalla Court House from north-east



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**Whyalla Court House from north**



**Whyalla Court House from east**



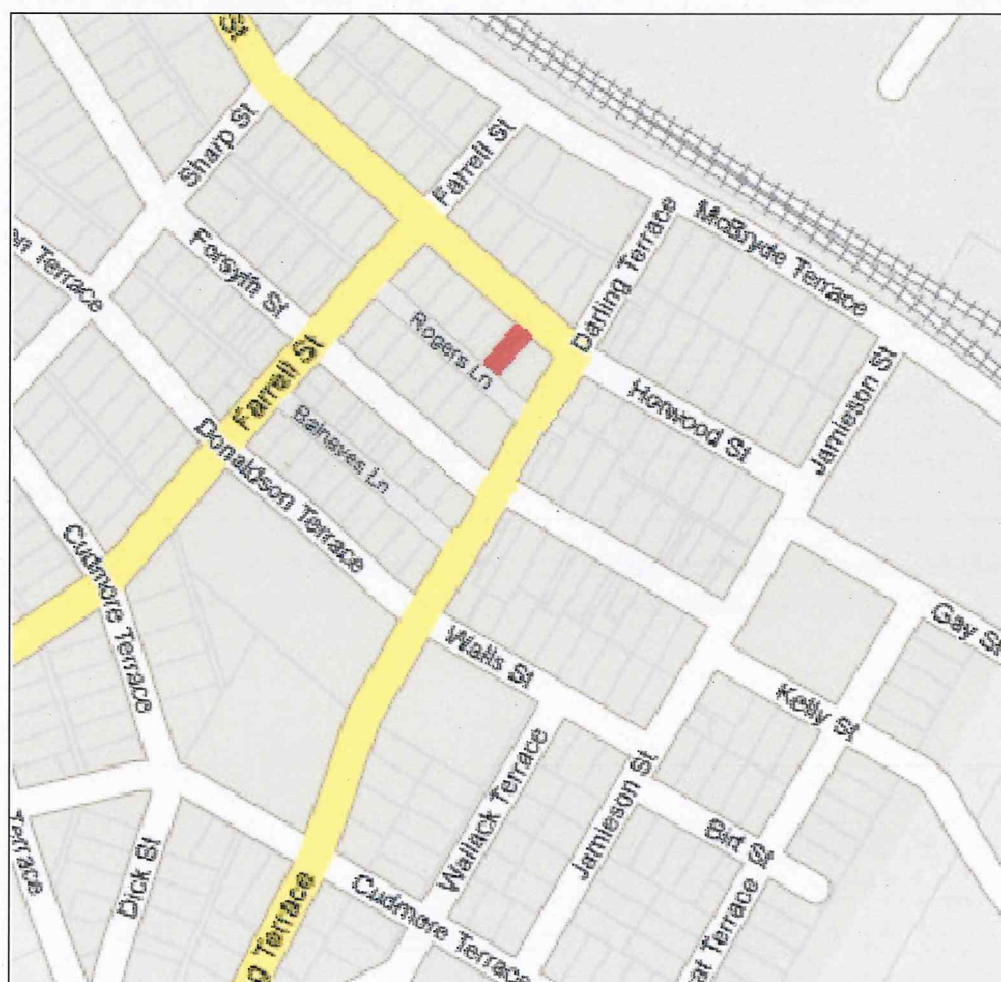
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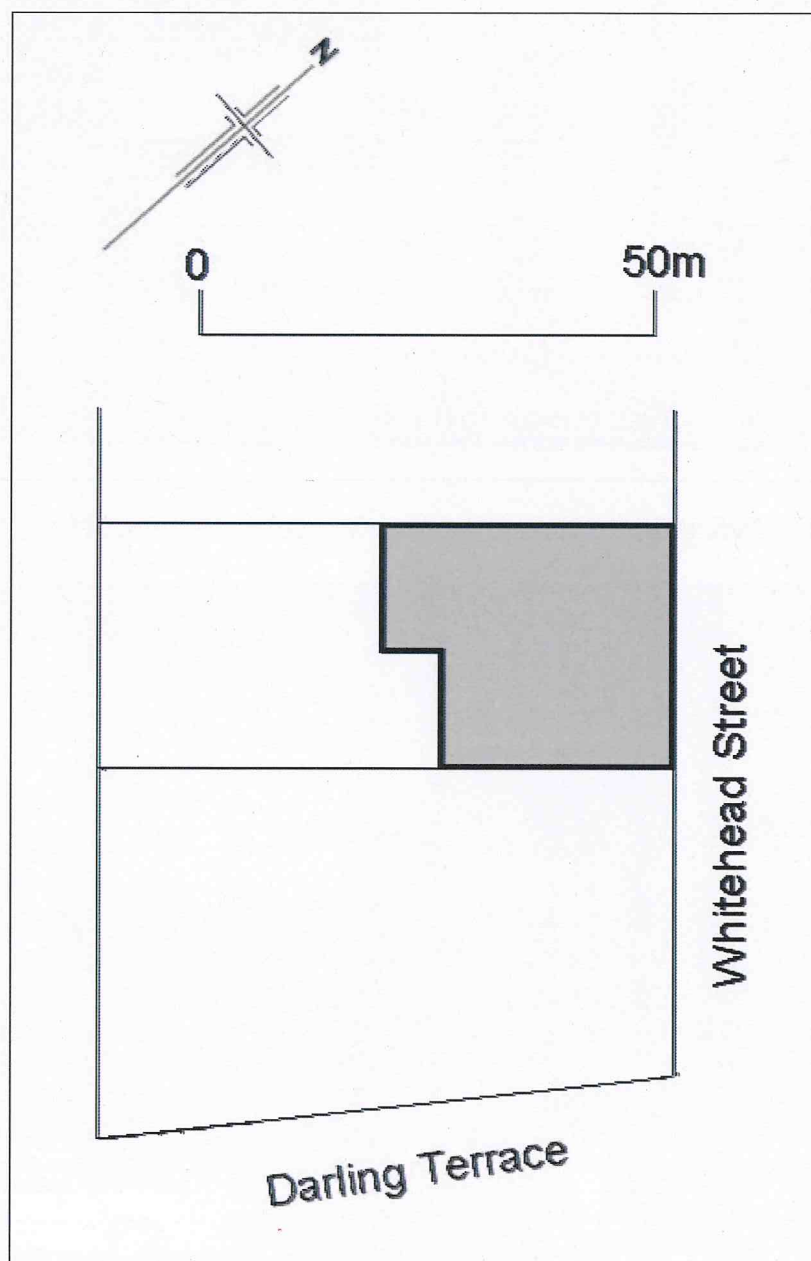
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Location Map



Location of Whyalla Court House

**Site Plan**



**Plan of Whyalla Court House**