

BETTER HERITAGE INFORMATION SUMMARY OF STATE HERITAGE PLACE

Karatta House



Karatta House, SHP 10464, November 2020.

Source: Google Street View

ENTRY IN THE REGISTER

Description or 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 South Australian Heritage Council may correct errors or inaccuracies in the Entry in the Register in accordance with s21 of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.

NAME: Karatta House

PLACE NO.: 10464

ADDRESS: 7 Karatta Road, Robe SA 5276
CT 5806/473 F206256 A97
Hundred of Waterhouse

CONFIRMED IN THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE REGISTER:

6 May 1982

COMMENTARY ON THE LISTING

Additional information provided as a part of the content of the South Australian Heritage Register in accordance with s14(6) of the *Heritage Places Act 1993* 'hold information in association with the Register'.

KNOWN Karatta

AS:

ADDRESS Bunganditj Country

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

Partially completed in 1863 for pastoralist Henry Jones and his wife Frances, Karatta House demonstrates the establishment of Robe as a desirable summer destination for wealthy South Australians during the second half of the nineteenth century. Reflecting its desirability as a summer retreat, Governor James Fergusson and his family stayed at Karatta House over the summers of 1870-71 and 1871-72. A succession of pastoralists and graziers subsequently owned or leased Karatta House until it was reconfigured in the late 1920s and 1930s to accommodate multiple guests.

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

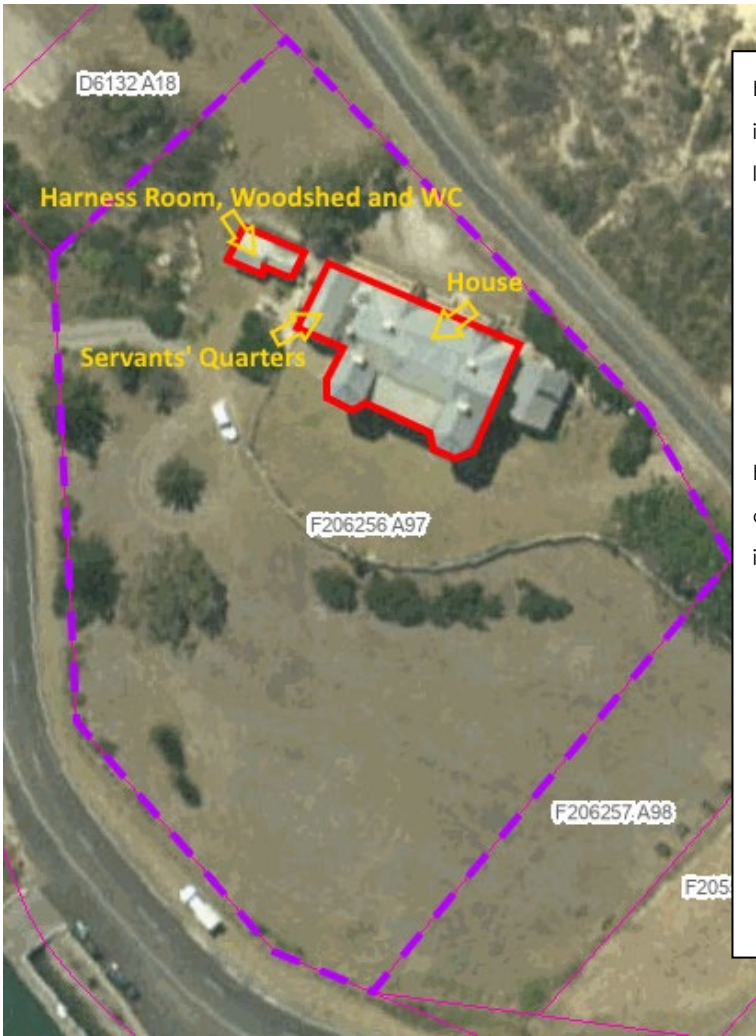
(a) it demonstrates important aspects of the evolution or pattern of the State's history

Karatta House demonstrates the establishment of Robe as a desirable summer destination for wealthy South Australians during the second half of the nineteenth century. During the mid-nineteenth century, extended summer retreats were generally limited to those who could afford leisure time and the cost of travel. Reflecting this pattern, in c.1857 Henry Jones, a pastoralist located in the South East, commissioned Edward Angus Hamilton, the Colonial Architect and Supervisor of Works, to design Karatta House. Intended as a summer retreat for Jones' wife Frances, Karatta House was partially completed by April 1863, with the final wing added to Hamilton's design in the 1880s. Karatta House was sufficiently grand to serve as the summer retreat for Governor James Fergusson and his family in 1870-71 and 1871-72. Karatta House was thereafter owned or leased by a succession of wealthy individuals and families before being reconfigured in the late 1920s and 1930s to accommodate multiple guests.

SITE PLAN

Karatta House
7 Karatta Road, Robe

PLACE NO.: 10464



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

- Karatta House,
- Single-storey servants' quarters,
- Harness room, woodshed and water closet outbuilding.

Elements not considered to contribute to significance of place include:

- Shed to the east of the house,
- Stairs at the southern elevation of the house,
- Landscaping,
- Non-original fixtures and fittings.

Karatta House, 7 Karatta Road, Robe, CT 5806/473 F206256 A97, Hundred of Waterhouse.

N ↑

LEGEND

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

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Karatta House is a large two-storey limestone dwelling with associated structures. The main structure comprises a rectangular building with a gable roof featuring two south-facing bay-fronted wings, each with hipped roofs. A single-storey limestone structure once containing servants' quarters has since been connected to the main dwelling. There is also a freestanding limestone structure with a stepped gable roof comprising harness room, woodshed and water closet. All roofs are clad in corrugated iron sheeting.

Additional features of the two-storey dwelling include:

- large verandah with two gablets at the southern elevation,
- large verandah enclosed with glazing with sloped roof at the northern elevation,
- lancet vent on the eastern gable end,
- five stone chimneys,
- scalloped facias and decorative finials,
- timber-framed double doors with glazed panels,
- timber-framed multi-paned casement windows.

Elements of Significance:

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HISTORY OF THE PLACE

The advent of holidaying in South Australia¹

Temporarily retreating to more salubrious places like 'resort towns' originated in Britain and Europe during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹ Leaving densely populated environments for places with fresh air, particularly the countryside, was believed to have a therapeutic benefit.² British migrants to South Australia brought this practice with them.

Wealthy South Australians would often relocate temporarily to places like the Adelaide Hills during the summer to escape the heat. The Governor and his family typically retreated during the summer, as demonstrated by the Governor's Former Summer Residences at Belair (SHP 10662), built in 1860, and at Marble Hill (SHP 10884), built in 1879 and used until it was destroyed by bushfire in 1955. Affluent South Australians often followed suit.³

The coast also attracted summer visitors, particularly for recreational holidaying. As in other Australasian capitals, Adelaide was situated near the coast. Going to the beach was thus generally more accessible to a broader population. Day visits to the beach were popular from the colony's outset, at least for those living nearby.⁴

Legislative, infrastructural and technological developments beginning in the late nineteenth century made holidaying more accessible. Government mandated holidays and regulated work hours gave people more time and opportunities to take part in leisure activities and go on holiday, while improved and public transportation increased accessibility to desirable locations, particularly to suburban beaches but also to places further afield such as Victor Harbor and Robe.⁵ In the twentieth century motor vehicles further increased the distances people could travel to holiday.

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.⁶ 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 1831.⁷

European exploration of the South East took place from 1839 and settlement began as early as 1840.⁸ 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

¹ This section is based on Lesley Abell, 'Holidays and Health in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century South Australia', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia* vol. 3, issue supplement (2023): pp.31-43.

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.⁹ Robe was officially declared a port by the Government in 1847.¹⁰

Situated towards the south of Guichen Bay, the town at Robe (or Robetown) emerged as the first major town of the South East.¹¹ Robe became the administrative centre of the region when a Government Resident was appointed in 1846.¹² 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 British and Irish people, as well as Chinese prospectors between 1857 and 1861, during the Victorian gold rush.¹³

Origins of Karatta House

Henry Jones migrated to Australia from England in 1842, first arriving in Victoria.¹⁴ By 1848, he and his brothers had established a pastoral station named Binnum Binnum near present-day Naracoorte in South Australia. After a slow beginning, their business boomed during the early 1850s, leading them to become prominent pastoralists in the South East. Much of the wool grown at Binnum Binnum was exported via the port at Robe while the brothers often procured supplies through Ormerod & Co., a shipping company located in the township.¹⁵

Henry frequented Robe and was a well-known figure in the town, apparently having a reputation for being 'pompous', yet good on a horse.¹⁶ In 1853, he purchased Section 30, Hundred of Waterhouse, a large tract of land towards the north-west of the township, situated between the coast and Lake Butler.¹⁷ Likely thereafter, Henry returned to England to marry Frances Caton, his cousin. The two returned to South Australia via Melbourne in April 1857.¹⁸

That year, Henry commissioned Edward Angus Hamilton, then the Colonial Architect and Supervisor of Works, to design a large two-storey house at his property in Robe.¹⁹ He did so to provide Frances with a summer retreat, away from the searing heat experienced inland.²⁰ Prior to its construction, Jones sold the land in 1861, but retained a right of residency for himself, his family and his heirs.²¹ He proceeded with his plan to build Karatta House in 1862.²²

Tenders to erect the building were called that year and construction was finished by early 1863.²³ In April, the *South Australian Register* described Karatta House as a 'magnificent marine retreat'. It also commented that while Robe had been a popular destination for country visitors, 'others would do well to imitate [Henry's] example and secure for themselves a residence in the prettiest little outport in the colony'.²⁴

Despite the praise, Karatta House had not been completed to Hamilton's initial design. Only one of the two front wings had been erected and, consequently, the verandah intended to sit between them was not built. The incomplete build may have been because Henry's funds had been depleted, possibly due to work conducted at his stations.²⁵ Regardless, he and his family spent several summers at Karatta House during the mid-1860s, where they 'entertained Robe society and the local squattocracy in grand English style'.²⁶

Henry's fortunes began to reverse in the late 1860s due to a combination of drought, debt and insecure pastoral leasing agreements.²⁷ Karatta House was subsequently used as a boarding house. Henry later sold the Binnum Binnum station and returned to England in the mid-1870s.²⁸

Karatta House as a Governor's Residence

Karatta House's prestige was renewed in the early 1870s. In 1869, the new Governor of South Australia, James Fergusson, passed through Robe on his way to Mount Gambier. Impressed with the town and its cool climate, Fergusson later selected Karatta House as the residence for his summer retreats.²⁹

The decision to stay at Robe was initially somewhat controversial, primarily due to its distance from Adelaide and because public money had already been spent on residences at Glenelg and Belair, the latter also designed by Hamilton. However, Fergusson assured he would travel frequently between Adelaide and Robe, easing concerns that he would be inaccessible in the South East for several months.³⁰

The Governor first stayed at Karatta House during the summer of 1870-71.³¹ The *South Australian Register* reported on 11 October 1870 that 'all doubts [were] now ... removed as to His Excellency's intention to spend a portion of the summer months at Guichen Bay'.³² In preparation, several changes and renovations were made to Karatta House. The contract to build servants' quarters was signed in early October, which almost certainly refers to the single-storey wing immediately to the west of the house.³³ By late November, 'painters, decorators and paperhangers' had finished preparing Karatta House for the Governor.³⁴

The *Evening Journal* hoped the Governor and his family would 'find the fine climate so conducive to health and comfort as to lead to a repetition of the visit in coming summers'.³⁵ Although his wife Edith passed away in November 1871, the Governor apparently returned for the 1871-72 summer.³⁶ If so, this would have been his last full summer retreat to Karatta House, as he relocated to New Zealand in December 1872 to serve as its Governor. However, his children may have stayed at Robe during the 1872-73 summer.³⁷

Subsequent History

Following the Governors' use of Karatta House, various wealthy individuals and families leased the property as a summer retreat, notably prominent pastoralist Robert Stockdale,³⁸ and then Henry Dutton after Stockdale died in 1881.³⁹ Dutton, who also owned Anlaby Station (SHP 11018) near Kapunda, is likely to have been responsible for erecting the second front wing and the front verandah, effectively completing the building.⁴⁰ Grazier George Riddoch took over in 1907 and was one of the last wealthy lessees to use Karatta House as a summer retreat.⁴¹

Karatta House was purchased by the Tonkin family in 1929.⁴² The Tonkins lived at the property and also transformed Karatta House to accommodate up to thirty guests, including 'additional bedrooms and a large guests' dining room' which was used for 'countless community events and private functions'.⁴³ The Tonkin family sold Karatta House in the early 1950s.⁴⁴

Karatta House has since had several owners, who have renovated the property. Notably, David and Peg Woods undertook major conservation work in the late 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁵ It has been used for social and community events, as well guest accommodation. Karatta House was confirmed as a State Heritage Place on 6 May 1982.

Aboriginal Cultural Considerations

The *Heritage Places Act 1993* makes provision for the identification, recording and conservation of places and objects of non-Aboriginal heritage significance. The protection and preservation of Aboriginal heritage is provided for under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988*. Contact the Aboriginal Heritage Unit for listings.

CHRONOLOGY

Year	Event
1842	Henry Jones arrives in Victoria from England.
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	Robe is officially gazetted as a port by the government.
1848	Henry Jones and his brothers establish Binnum Binnum, a pastoral station located near present-day Naracoorte in South Australia.
1853	Henry Jones buys Section 30, Hundred of Waterhouse.
1857	Henry Jones returns to South Australia with his new wife Frances.

- Jones commissions Colonial Architect Edward Angus Hamilton to design a large two-storey house to be used as a summer retreat.
- 1862** Tenders are sought to construct Jones' two-storey building, known as Karatta House, and work begins sometime during the year. Although not part of Hamilton's plans, the outbuilding containing a harness room, woodshed and water closet outbuilding is likely built simultaneously with the house.
- 1863** Construction of Karatta House is finalised by April. The building is not completely finished to Hamilton's design, lacking one of two front wings and verandah.
- c.1863-1868** The Jones family reside at Karatta House during the summer months.
- 1868** Karatta House is used as a boarding house.
- 1870** The servants' quarters immediately to the west of Karatta House are built.
- 1870-1871** Governor James Ferguson and his family stay at Karatta House during their summer retreats.
- 1875-1919** The second wing and balcony are added to the southern elevation, probably by Henry Dutton.
- 1930s** Karatta House is reconfigured to accommodate up to thirty guests.
- 1982** **6 May: Karatta House is confirmed as a State Heritage Place.**
- 1986** The State Heritage Branch conditionally approved Development Application 822/0050/86/8 to conduct major conservation work on Karatta House.
- 1989** The State Heritage Branch approves Development Application 822/0031/89/PB to conduct further conservation work on Karatta House.

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- Cockburn, Rodney. *Pastoral Pioneers of South Australia*, Vol. 2, facsimile edition indexed by A. Dorothy Aldersey. 1925; Blackwood, SA: Lynton Publications, 1974.
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- BHI Summary of State Heritage Place: 10464
- Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 6 May 1982
- Draft BHI SSHP for Consultation 6 August 2026 to 6 November 2026

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'Government Land Sale', *Adelaide Times*, 26 September 1853, p.2.

'Latest News ... Viceregal Residence at Robe', *Evening Journal*, 21 November 1870, p.2.

'Shipping Intelligence', *South Australian Register*, 20 April 1857, p.2.

'Viceregal', *South Australian Register*, 11 October 1870, p.5.

Land Titles

Certificate of Title Vol. 37, Folio 117.

Certificate of Title Vol. 2206, Folio 85.

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SITE DETAILS

Karatta House

PLACE NO.: 10464

7 Karatta Road, Robe

DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:	Two-storey limestone house with symmetrical bay-fronted wings, servants' quarters and outbuildings.		
HISTORIC THEME/S	4. Building Settlements, Towns and Cities 4.5 Living in country towns 5. Developing South Australia's economies 5.11 Developing SA's tourism industry (welcoming tourists and visitors)		
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:	c.1862		
REGISTER STATUS:	Nominated: 13 September 1978 Provisionally Entered: 24 September 1981 Confirmed: 6 May 1982		
CURRENT USE:	Holiday accommodation, c.1980s - present		
PREVIOUS USE(S):	Governor's Residence, 1870-1872 Boarding House, 1929 – c.1980s		
ARCHITECT:	Edward Angus Hamilton, c.1862		
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA:	District Council of Robe		
LOCATION:	Street	7 Karatta Road	
	Address:	Robe SA 5276	
LAND DESCRIPTION:	Title	CT 5806/473 F206256 A97	
	Reference:		
	Hundred:	Waterhouse	

PHOTOS

Karatta House

PLACE NO.: 10464

7 Karatta Road, Robe



Karatta House from the south-west showing servants' quarters and outbuildings and single front wing, c.1869.

Source: SLISA B9871



Southern elevation of Karatta House showing servants' quarters and outbuildings and single front wing, c.1869.

Source: SLISA B9869

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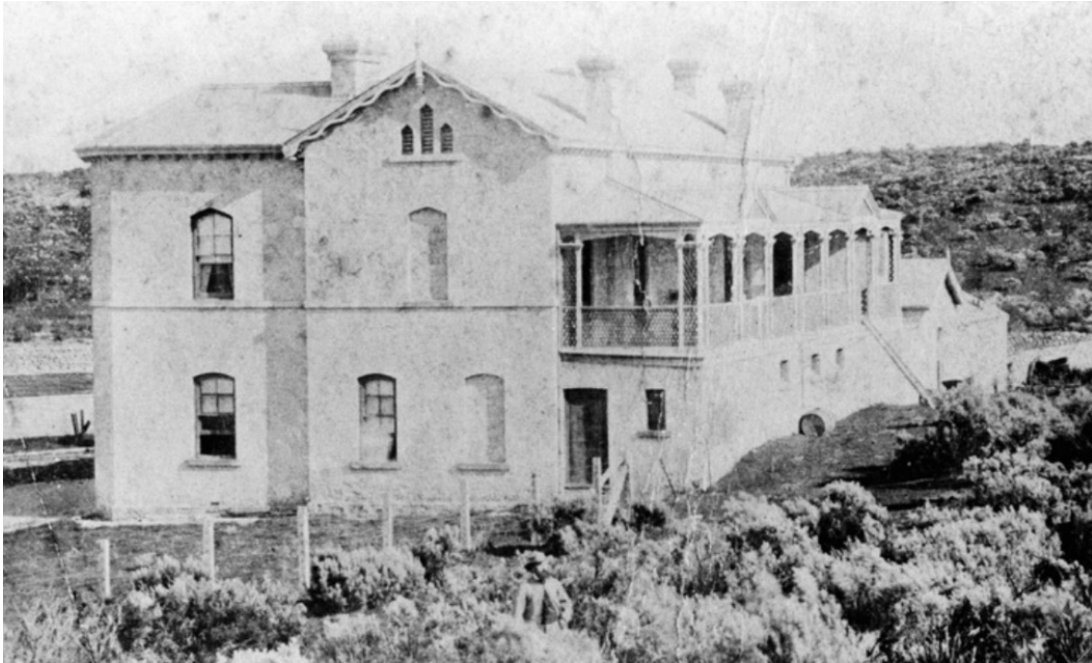
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Karatta House

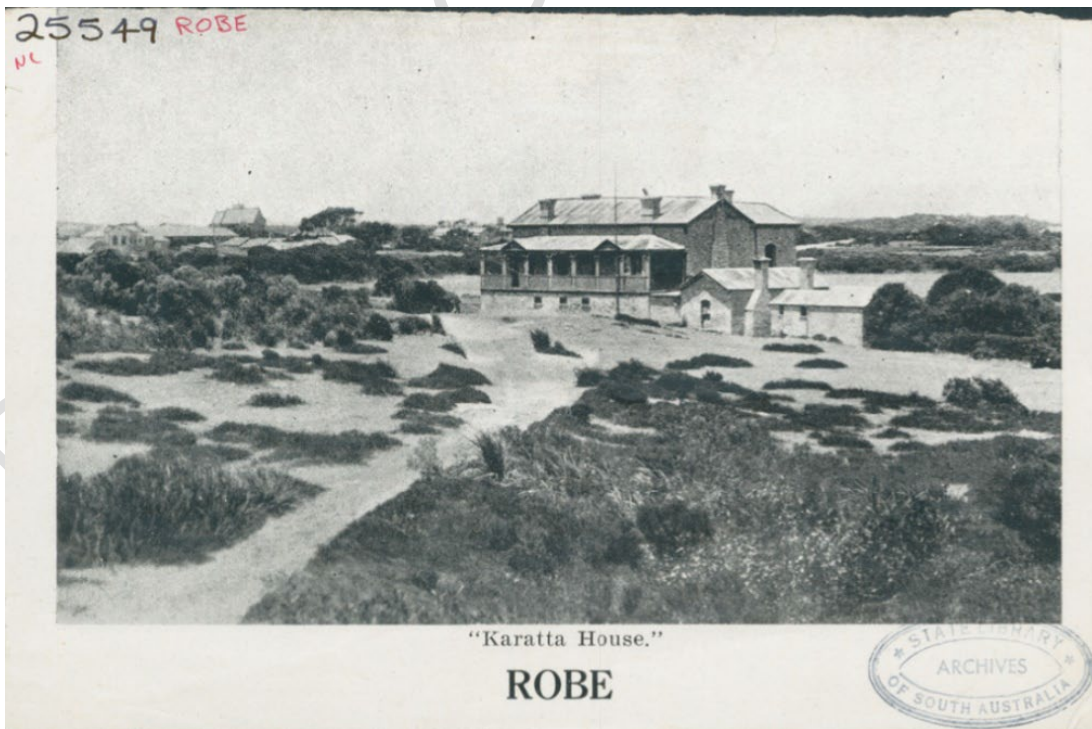
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7 Karatta Road, Robe



Eastern elevation of Karatta House showing front verandah without steps (note the ladder).

Source: SLSA B62362



Karatta House from the north-west showing the servants' quarters and outbuildings, c.1910.

Source: SLSA B 25549

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Karatta House

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7 Karatta Road, Robe



Distant view of Karatta House showing proximity to coast (right), Lake Butler (left) and Cape Dombey (note Obelisk and Gaol to the top-right corner), c.1923.

Source: SLSA B2227



Eastern elevation of Karatta House showing two front wings, c.1936.

Source: SLSA B43968/141

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Southern elevation of Karatta House, c.1983.

Source: DEW Files



Northern elevation of Karatta House, c.1983.

Source: DEW Files

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Karatta House viewed from the south-east, c.1983.

Source: DEW Files



Stone outbuildings viewed from the south, c.1983.

Source: DEW Files

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Northern verandah being renovated, c.1990.

Source: DEW Files



The servants' quarters after conservation work and repointing, c.1990.

Source: DEW Files

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Karatta House

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Karatta House viewed from the north, c.2010.

Source: DEW Files



Front verandah showing repointing, c.2010.

Source: DEW Files

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Servants' Quarters after repointing, c.2010.

Source: DEW Files



Northern elevation of harness room, woodshed and water closet outbuilding after repointing, c.2010.

Source: DEW Files

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Southern elevation of Karatta House, 2016.

Source: flickr.com (user: 'denisbin'); per [CC BY-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/)



Eastern elevation of Karatta House, 2016.

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Western elevation of Karatta House, 2016.

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Northern elevation of Karatta House, 2016.

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REVISIONS

Date	Changes
13 February 2026	SAHC modified template to include an image at the beginning of the document.

¹ Lesley Abell, 'Holidays and Health in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century South Australia', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia* vol.3, issue supplement (2023), p.32.

² Abell, 'Holidays and Health', pp.32-34.

³ Abell, 'Holidays and Health', p.35.

⁴ Abell, 'Holidays and Health', pp.34-35.

⁵ Abell, 'Holidays and Health', p.33 and p.37.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.11; Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, p.12.

⁸ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, pp.14-16; Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, p.14.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, pp.4-10.

¹¹ Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, pp.4-10.

¹² Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, pp.21-24.

¹³ Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, pp.10-16.

¹⁴ Kathleen Bermingham, *The Second Eleven Tales of Robe* (Robe: self-published, 1971), p.33.

¹⁵ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.184; David Young, *Karatta House, Robe* (Adelaide: South Australian Department of Environment and Planning, 1981), p.4.

¹⁶ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.184; Young, *Karatta House*, p.4.

¹⁷ 'Government Land Sale', *Adelaide Times*, 26 September 1853, p.2.

¹⁸ 'Shipping Intelligence', *South Australian Register*, 20 April 1857, p.2.

¹⁹ Young, *Karatta House*, p.5.

²⁰ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.184.

²¹ Young, *Karatta House*, p.7.

²² 'Guichen Bay', *South Australian Advertiser*, 12 July 1862, p.3.

²³ 'Guichen Bay', *South Australian Advertiser*, 12 July 1862, p.3; Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.184; 'Guichen Bay', *South Australian Register* (Adelaide), 8 April 1863, p.3.

²⁴ 'Guichen Bay', 8 April 1863, p.3.

²⁵ Young, *Karatta House*, p.6.

²⁶ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.186.

²⁷ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.186.

²⁸ 21 November 1870, p.2.

²⁹ Young, *Karatta House*, p.7.

³⁰ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.186.

³¹ 'Viceregal', *South Australian Register*, 11 October 1870, p.5.

³² 'Viceregal', 11 October 1870, p.5.

³³ 'Viceregal', 11 October 1870, p.5.

³⁴ 'Latest News ... Viceregal Residence at Robe', *Evening Journal*, 21 November 1870, p.2.

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³⁵ 'Latest News ... Viceregal', 21 November 1870, p.2.

³⁶ There is some uncertainty about when Fergusson actually stayed at Karatta House as various years have been proposed. It is certain he and the family stayed during the 1870-71 summer. Liz Harfull advises that he 'returned to Robe for one more summer, but left [for New Zealand] in December 1872'. This suggests that he was at Karatta during the 1871-72 season. Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.186.

³⁷ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.186.

³⁸ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.186; Young, *Karatta House*, pp.7-8.

³⁹ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.186; Young, *Karatta House*, pp.7-8.

⁴⁰ Young, *Karatta House*, p.8.

⁴¹ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.186.

⁴² Certificate of Title Vol. 37, no. 177, transfer no. 1072320.

⁴³ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.187.

⁴⁴ Certificate of Title Vol. 2206, Folio 85, transfer no. 1735151.

⁴⁵ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, p.187.