Port Adelaide State Heritage Area

Port Adelaide was declared a State Heritage Area on 29 April 1982.

HISTORY

Adelaide's port was initially (1836) a primitive landing place on the Port Creek (later Port Adelaide River), about two kilometres upstream of the present Birkenhead Bridge. Conditions for landing both goods and passengers at this original Port Adelaide were very poor, and the site became known as 'Port Misery'. After four years a new landing place was established by the South Australian Company, at the northern end of what is now Port/Commercial Road.

The 'New Port' was officially opened by Governor George Gawler on 14 October 1840. The first wharf, named McLaren Wharf in honour of David McLaren, a manager of the South Australian Company, was constructed of timber. It was built out into the Port River as the simplest means of reaching deeper water.

The land north of St Vincent Street and west of Commercial Road was set aside as a government reserve. A government wharf was soon completed in this area (west of McLaren Wharf) and a two-storey Customs House and Harbor Master's residence was erected where the old (fourth) Port Adelaide Customs House stands today. The area to the east of Commercial Road quickly evolved as the Port's commercial and business centre.

The newly located port developed rapidly. Wharves were gradually constructed upstream and downstream of the original ones, and were supplemented by the construction of docks and basins. Private enterprise initially developed most of the wharves, but they were later taken over by the South Australian Harbours Board. The river channel was widened and deepened, with the dredged silt being used for the reclamation of the adjacent swampy land. By the 1850s many substantial buildings were established in areas adjacent to the waterfront, and in 1855 Port Adelaide was declared a corporate town.

As the Port developed, links with Adelaide became more formalised. A government-owned railway from Port Adelaide to the capital was opened in 1856. This was South Australia's first steam-powered service.

The 1860s was a period of immense development and growth for Port Adelaide, as it was for South Australia generally. The products of successful mining ventures and of agricultural industries (especially wheat and wool) were important exports for Port Adelaide during this time.

A major flood in 1865 caused great damage in many areas, when high tides and strong winds forced the river water over the levee bank. This highlighted the need for land reclamation, which had been ongoing since the 1840s and continued into the 1870s, and resulted in the raising of ground levels against many buildings.

In 1883 the telephone link between Adelaide and the Port was established. There had been an early electric telegraph from 1855, but the telephone now connected the Port's businesses better with the city. During the 1890s and early 1900s the facilities within Port Adelaide were continually upgraded. Electricity replaced gas street lighting in 1899 and a power station was constructed in Nile Street in 1907 (now demolished).

Waterfront changes during the twentieth century involved the upgrading of the wharves, including the development of an outer harbour (1908), and the construction of the Birkenhead Bridge (opened 1940).

Settlement and industry expanded throughout the district during the 1900s, but Port Adelaide's historic core saw little change. The choice of the 1840 site had provided large areas for waterfront development along the river, which enabled expansion of the port's wharves without the need to clear established buildings. Equally, the potential threat to the town's historic centre in the 1960s, by the development of a regional shopping centre and car park, did not occur. By the 1980s, when this 'modernisation' began in Port Adelaide, a site away from the heritage precinct was available. The result, more by accident than design, is that the Port Adelaide state heritage area contains one of the best concentrations of colonial buildings in the metropolitan area.

The state heritage area is only a small part of the district recognised as Port Adelaide. While the outline above provides a brief history of the area's development, it is the stories of the parallel establishment of dwellings, businesses, industries and shipping across 'Greater Port Adelaide' that provide the context for, and links between, the heritage precinct and the surrounding area.

CHARACTER

Port Adelaide's heritage core, the designated state heritage area, reflects the town's past as both a busy and prosperous port and as the main service centre for the district. While the greater Port Adelaide area has undergone considerable growth and redevelopment during the latter 20th century, the historic precinct still retains a unique and extensive collection of late nineteenth and early twentieth century architecture – a mix of buildings illustrating the Port's maritime, as well as commercial, past.

Although the wharf frontage lies just outside the state heritage area boundary, its contribution to the area's character is significant. The Port has played host to the sailing vessels of yesteryear, to steamships and, in more recent times, to sophisticated bulk cargo and container ships. It is still a working port but, with larger ships and modern means of handling cargoes, port functions have changed and few vessels now visit the older wharves of the inner harbour.

Extensive storage sheds built in the 1950s resulted in the almost complete separation of the town area and the waterfront. In the 1980s a section of No.1 Shed was demolished to provide a site for the old Port Adelaide Lighthouse, with the result that a view of the river became part of the Commercial Road streetscape. More recently areas of Port Adelaide's waterfront have been cleared for housing, and further areas are earmarked for redevelopment in the inner harbour. The construction of a third river crossing (the Port River Expressway) is also likely to change Port Adelaide's waterfront character.

The historic appeal of the Port Adelaide state heritage area results from its recognised collection of heritage buildings. Streetscapes are characterised by continuous facades to the street boundaries, with few early structures demolished, replaced or substantially altered. The architecture is predominantly Victorian, ranging from early styles, such as the Bondstore and former Union Bank in Lipson Street to mid-Victorian structures such as the former Telegraph Station on North Parade. A number of buildings also reveal high-Victorian styles, for example St Vincent Chambers, the old Courthouse and (probably the best example of the excesses of this period) the former Bank of Adelaide in Lipson Street. There are few late Victorian buildings in Port Adelaide, but many shops and hotels have alterations of this period (for example the former Britannia Hotel). The lack of buildings in this style probably reflects the widespread economic depression of the 1890s.

Such a concentration of preserved heritage buildings, most of which are still used, creates a cohesive historic landscape within the state heritage area. Some of these structures, such as hotels and a few shipping offices and warehouses, serve their original functions but most have been adapted for alternate community and private use. Former warehouses, workshops, banks and offices are now private residences or trade as antique shops and cafes. The old police station welcomes tourists as the region's Visitor Information Centre, the former courthouse serves as Council Chambers and Lipson Street's Bondstore houses one of South Australia's most acclaimed museums.

The 'old-world' atmosphere of the area has been reinforced through other streetscape elements, such as placing powerlines underground, redesigning street lighting to emulate the gas light fittings of the 1800s, maintaining or installing stone kerbs and gutterings in some streets, widening footpaths, and landscaping and tree-planting.
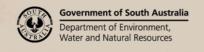
One aspect of Port Adelaide's early history that has provided a unique character to parts of the state heritage area, was the gradual raising of street and allotment levels between the 1840s - 1870s. Because of flooding produced during high tides, the streets of Port Adelaide were built up with material dredged from the river. The building sites however were not generally raised to the same levels and, as a consequence, many early buildings were elevated to street height on heavy timber structures, with the rear of these properties at the original ground level. Alternately, some earlier buildings had street levels raised after they were constructed, resulting in ground floor levels 'disappearing' below footpaths. A stroll along Lipson Street, for example, will highlight a number of such buildings, including the Railway Hotel, which has stables in its basement, with the former entrance doorways partially exposed at street level.

FEATURES

The most notable feature of the Port Adelaide state heritage area, apart from its obvious maritime links, is the area's wealth of well-preserved 19th and early 20th century architecture. The precinct contains the most substantial and continuous grouping of commercial and administrative colonial buildings in South Australia.

VISITING

The Port Adelaide state heritage area is only 20 minutes from Adelaide. It is one of the city's popular suburban tourist spots, and offers a variety of visitor experiences related to its colonial and maritime past.

One of the Area's most significant characteristics is its fine collection of nineteenth century commercial and civic buildings. These are best appreciated by following one of the self-guided walking trails, or by joining a volunteer tour guide.

The area also contains many other attractions, including the renowned SA Maritime Museum, art galleries, antique shops, cafes and heritage pubs. The Port Adelaide Visitor Information Centre provides detailed information about all of Port Adelaide's attractions and visitor programs.

The state heritage area is adjacent to the Port Adelaide waterfront and so visitors to the area can also experience the city's maritime flavour. A stroll along the wharves, past the relocated Port Adelaide Lighthouse, reveals a working port with its associated industries and infrastructure. The waterfront is changing though, and so modern housing and waterfront cafes are also becoming part of the visitor experience.

Further Information

For further information please contact the State Heritage Unit

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