Place name:	Moreton Bay Fig Tree
Address:	93 Bulla Road, Strathmore
Place typology:	Landscape
Construction date range:	Circa 1870s
Assessment:	heritage ALLIANCE, May 2021
Recommendation:	That the place be included in the heritage overlay schedule

Photo of place:



93 Bulla Road, Strathmore. Photograph, heritage ALLIANCE, May 2021

Statement of Significance:

What is significant?

A large Moreton Bay Fig (Ficus Macrophylla) located on an open piece of land at the front of 93 Bulla Road, Strathmore. At 93 Bulla Road, Strathmore is a motel, and the tree is located beside the driveway.

How is it significant?

The Moreton Bay Fig at 93 Bulla Road, Strathmore is of local historic significance to the City of Moonee Valley.

Why is it significant?

A large specimen Moreton Bay Fig at 93 Bulla Road, Strathmore is likely to have been planted circa 1870s. It appears to have been associated with the house and gardens of Mr John Harbison, horticulturalist and pomologist who was known to have grown such a tree in association with his well-known orchards and gardens. The fig tree is the only evidence of Mr Harbison's gardens in this area and the extensive subdivisions of his property which he undertook to create this area around Kerferd Street and Bulla Road, Strathmore, between 1885 and 1926. (Criterion A)

Description:

A large Moreton Bay Fig approximately 20m high with a canopy of approximately 30m across. The tree is located in a small grassed area beside the driveway of a motel. There is a timber paling fence to the side of the tree, close to its trunk. The tree's exposed roots are protected within the open grassed area but on the other side of the paling fence is a paved driveway to the neighbouring units. A small parking bay exists at the rear of the garden area under a canopy and a number of rubbish bins and dumpsters are parked there.

From a street side inspection, the tree canopy appears to be quite dense and healthy with only a few senescent branches.

History:

Contextual History

City of Moonee Valley occupies part of the Traditional lands of the Wurundjeri-willam clan of the Woi-wurrung people. Many sites in the area now known as City of Moonee Valley show evidence of Woi-wurrung activities and spiritual connections. Fish were trapped in the rivers and creeks, stone was quarried from the river edges, murnong daisy was collected and kangaroos hunted across grassland areas, and bark was harvested from trees in the river valleys. This relationship between the Woi-wurrung and the land, water, animals and plants, continues to this day (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.29).

The first Europeans to explore the area known as Moonee Valley was a surveyor, Charles Grimes in 1803. In 1836, settlers moving from Van Diemen's Land crossed the area in the hope of finding empty, cheap and plentiful land for sheep. By 1842, surveyors had created the first map of the Parish of Doutta Galla and then Woi-wurrung lands were offered for sale by the British Crown to Europeans (noting that the land was never ceded). The Wurundjeri were moved off their land which had a profound impact on their culture, health and language. By 1860, the entire parish was sold (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.32-33).

Early development of the area began with the goldrush period of the 1850s which saw Mount Alexander Road used as a thoroughfare to the gold diggings with over 30,000 people estimated as moving along the dirt road each week. Businesses and shops sprang up providing sustenance, transport and accommodation to service the passing gold rush trade. Some very early wayside hotels and shops still survive from this period (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.51-54).

After the heady days of the goldrush, the 1860s saw Essendon, Ascot Vale, Moonee Ponds and Flemington develop into permanent townships. The development of railways by private companies gave huge impetus to suburban development of the area with the opening of the Essendon railway in 1860. The government purchased the line in 1868. Suburban trains terminated at Essendon and it wasn't until 1889 that Ascot Vale, Moonee Ponds and Newmarket stations were completed. By 1893 stations opened at Strathmore and Pascoe Vale, and in 1922 Glenbervie Station opened. The railways provided an enormous boost to residential development along the line (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.59).

By the 1880s Essendon had become a Borough and by 1891 had a population of 14,411. Many subdivisions occurred during the land boom of the 1880s however many failed to eventuate due to the depression of the 1890s. In the interwar period a boom in subdivision and residential infill occurred in Travancore, Essendon, Ascot Vale, Strathmore and Moonee Ponds, which was focused on new transport routes along the tram lines, first established to Essendon in 1905. In 1919 the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board was formed and tram lines were extended and improved. The tram lines saw development occur either side of Maribyrnong Road, and further along Mt Alexander Road, Buckley Street and Keilor Road. (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.65-68; p.115)

In the decades after the Second World War, Melbourne's suburbs ballooned outward to cater for post-war migration, the baby boom, an increasing need for new housing, and a more car-centred economy. Areas to the north of Essendon had been open paddocks in 1945, but by 1950 the Shire of Keilor found themselves with a developing suburb with no name. It was later called Niddrie. Similarly, Airport West was developing quickly with houses being built before the roads. By 1964 it was claimed that Airport West had the cheapest cream brick veneers in Melbourne (Context, *Thematic History*, 2012: p.120-121).

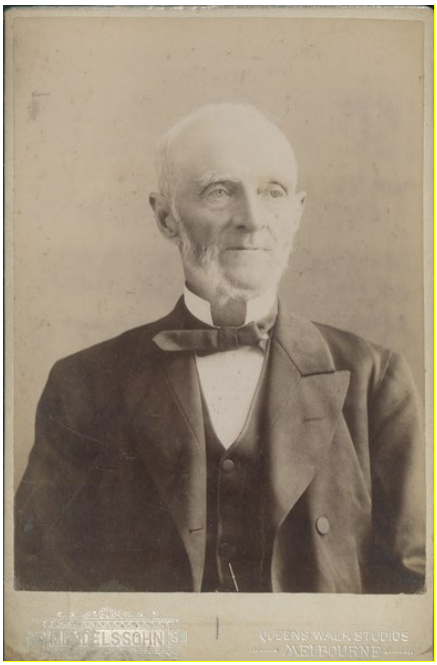
Many houses in these post-war areas were austere weatherboard or brick veneer bungalows, with a few scattered architect designed or project homes on new blocks, particularly along the Boulevard in Aberfeldie. These post-war housing areas were car-centred communities located close to industry along Keilor Road, Matthews Avenue around Essendon Airport and East Keilor. By 1960 Airport West had its first hotel, the famous Skyways Hotel and then in the 1970s the first shopping centre, owned by Westfield was opened (heritage ALLIANCE, *Gap Heritage Study*, 2005: p.28-30)

Post-war housing pressure also saw a huge investment by the Housing Commission of Victoria who initially developed 150 bungalows in concrete, weatherboard and brick in Aberfeldie. They then began an ambitious estate of houses and flats on a 77 acre site at Ascot Vale in 1949. These low-rise walk-up flats eventually gave rise to the high-rise flats of Flemington which opened in June 1965 (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.123).

Many post-war migrants bought or built houses in the outer areas of the municipality, close to employment and industry and where new, cheaper housing was readily available. These developments and public housing in Aberfeldie, Ascot Vale and Flemington have had a long-lasting effect on the nature of the Moonee Valley community which today is one of the most diverse and vibrant in Melbourne (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.124).

Place history

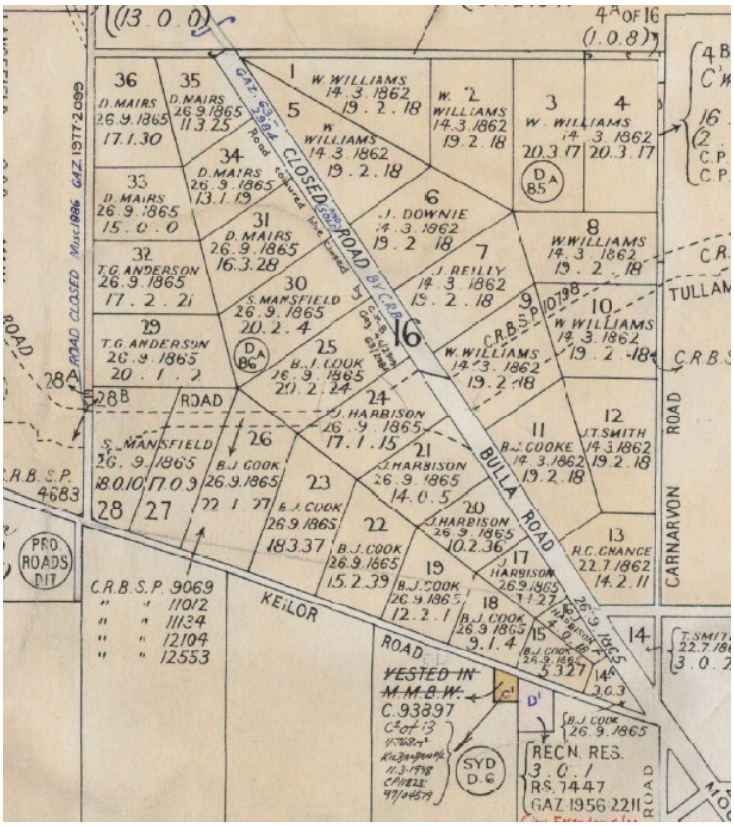
This tree is in what had been originally John Harbison's orchard of the 1870s. Harbison migrated from Armagh, Ireland in 1849 and served as a city councillor and legislative member (*Weekly Times*, 4 Sept 1915, p.24). Retiring in 1870, Harbison then pursued his interest in horticulture, becoming known as "the most enthusiastic and successful amateur pomologists (*Leader*, 23 May 1874, p.8)."



Sepia portrait, "Mr Harbison, A Trustee and loyal supporter of the Lower Hawthorn church," c. late 19th/early 20th century, Uniting Church Archives – Synod of Victoria.

The land he owned and purchased in 1865 totalled some 54 acres in 1876 and was aligned in lots 16, 17, 20, 21 and 24 of Section 16 Parish of Doutta Galla (*Parish Doutta Galla map*, Public Records Office Victoria, VPRS 16171/P1/2). These allotments were aligned along the west side of Bulla Road, Strathmore from the Keilor Road intersection up to today's bypass road just at the Essendon Airport. This places the tree in allotment 24 on the parish plan. A description of the residence in the *Weekly Times* affirms the location of the residence, writing:

> *"From the front room windows a pleasing and commanding view of Melbourne, the surrounding country, and the shipping in the bay is obtained (Weekly Times, 11 Nov 1871, p.7)."*



Exert from Doutta Galla Parish Plan, Public Records Office Victoria: VPRS 16171/P1/2.

Further description tells us that in 1876, Harbison had nine acres planted as orchard and shrubbery (*The Australasian*, 22 Jan 1876, p.25). Of this, seven acres were part of a fruit orchard containing many varieties of pears and apples as well as apricots and cherries. Harbison was renowned for creating new varietals, with models of his pears and apples made for display at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876 (Pear Model, Museums Victoria, ST 13939; Apple Model, Museums Victoria, ST 13459). In reference to his expertise, the *Leader* states:

> *"It has always been a cause of complaint among orchardists that so many varieties have been sent out under wrong names, but we were far from being fully aware of the extent of the evil until shown by Mr. Harbison the large portion of the trees which he has purchased under incorrect designations, and we cannot avoid remarking that the evil exists in greater force in New South Wales than in Victoria […] (Leader, 23 May 1874, p.8)."*

Surrounding the orchard was a quarter mile drive with trees and shrubs planted along it, acting as wind breakers to protect the orchard. The *Weekly Times* article gives an approximate date of these plantings, writing:

> *"[…] Mr. Harbison has taken the precaution to plant largely of pines and ornamental trees, with an outer circle of gums, which even at his early date are of considerable value as break-winds, although, it is only between four and five years since they were planted (Weekly Times, 11 Nov 1871, p.7)."*

Among these were a number of ornamental species, referred to by their scientific names, including Pinus insignis, Pinus canariense, Aracaria excelsa, Cedrus deodara, Australis cedar of Lebanon, Cupressus macropara, Pittosporum nigrescens, Hymenosperma pittosporeides, Wellingtonia gigantea, Ceanothus divaricatus, and most notably, Ficus marcrophylla among others (*The Australasian*, 22 Jan 1876, p.25). The Ficus marcophylla is otherwise known as the Moreton Bay Fig, and likely the tree that remains today.

In 1885, the first of two subdivisions of Harbison's Royal Garden Estate took place. Ninety grand blocks were offered with frontages to Mt Alexander and Bulla Roads. The Royal Garden Estate may not have been close to the city, according to advertisements, but noted that "one will be able to get a splendid high block, with avenue of the choiciest shrubs ready grown for half the price of inferior land nearer the city (*The Age*, 28 Nov 1885, p10)."

The sale was successful, having sold all 90 allotments (*North Melbourne Advertiser*, 20 Nov 1885, p.3). The most lucrative allotments had frontages along Bulla Road realising 25 to 36 shillings per foot, Royal Avenue realising up to 27 shillings per foot and Kerferd Street realising 28 shillings (*The Age*, 20 Nov 1885, p.4). The sales brought in a total of just over £4,741 (*The Age,* 20 Nov 1885, p.4).

A second sale was held two years later in 1887, selling an additional 74 lots (*The Herald*, 1 Dec 1887, p.3). Further subdivisions of the grand blocks would occur over the decades, as Strathmore became populated, and development increased. Many of the original developments along Bulla Road date to the 1920s, which corresponds to a later subdivision of the Royal Gardens Estate advertised in 1926 *(Sunshine Advocate*, 12 June 1926, p.3).

Sources:

Primary Sources

The Age
The Australasian
Doutta Galla Parish Plan, Public Records Office Victoria
The Herald
Leader
Models, Museums Victoria Collection
"Mr Harbison, A Trustee and loyal supporter of the Lower Hawthorn church," c. late 19th/early 20th century, Uniting Church Archives – Synod of Victoria: https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/5a124a2d21ea691db4a1f4dc
North Melbourne Advertiser
Sunshine Advocate
Weekly Times

Thematic Context:

City of Moonee Valley Thematic Environmental History, 2012

4. Transforming and managing land and resources

4.4 Farming

Comparative Analysis:

There are very few individual trees listed on the heritage overlay of the Moonee Valley planning scheme. This study is recommending two places that are trees, which are of historical significance for their association with former sites; 93 Bulla Road and 167-175 Mt Alexander Road, Flemington. In both instances all standing fabric of the historical place has gone, but the trees remain to mark the site and are the only above ground fabric remaining.

	All photos are from Google Streetview
143 Canary Island Palm Trees on Mount Alexander Road, listed on HO80 and on the Victorian Heritage Register H1200. These trees are listed in the heritage overlay because they are on the Victorian Heritage Register for aesthetic and landscape significance rather than historical reasons. They are the longest planting of Canary Island Palms in Victoria.	
HO343, the former Wannaeue homestead site was occupied for over a century by one of Strathmore's earliest houses, erected in the 1870s by prominent local resident John Murray Peck (1830-1903). Subsequently occupied by his widow until her death in 1928, and thence by long-time Broadmeadows Shire Secretary A T C Cook the house was demolished in 1980. The site, now occupied by a restaurant, retains remnant plantings in the form of Canary Island date palms, privet hedge and pepper trees, as well as a portion of the woven wire boundary fence along the Gaffney Street side.	

Recommendation:

That the Moreton Bay Fig, to the extent of the tree canopy and root zone, be included in the Heritage Overlay schedule

Schedule:

External Paint Controls	No
Internal Alteration Controls	No
Tree Controls	Yes, *Ficus Macrophylla.*
Solar Energy Controls	Yes
Fences and Outbuildings	No
Prohibited Uses	No
Aboriginal Heritage Place	No