

Heritage Citation



Key details

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| Addresses | At 57 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley, Queensland 4006 |
| Type of place | Shop/s |
| Period | Interwar 1919-1939 |
| Style | Stripped Classical |
| Lot plan | L2_SP107694; L6_SP107694; L9_SP107694; L1_SP107694; L3_SP107694; L8_SP107694; L4_SP107694; L7_SP107694; L5_SP107694 |
| Key dates | Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2004 Date of Citation — July 2010 |
| Construction | Roof: Corrugated iron; Walls: Masonry |
| People/associations | Eric Percival Trewern (Architect) |
| Criterion for listing | (A) Historical; (E) Aesthetic; (H) Historical association |

The Bell Brothers building was originally constructed in 1923. It was part of an expansion in the fringes of Fortitude Valley as the Valley continued to be one of the most prominent commercial districts in Brisbane.

Alexander and Mary Bell ran their furniture manufacturing business from the premises until the property burnt down in 1931. The building was reconstructed in 1932 by notable interwar architect Eric Trewern. The Bell family continued the Bell Brothers business from the site until 1988.

History

By 1920, the Valley had established itself as a prime commercial district in Brisbane. As well as the shopping precinct centred on the Valley Corner, it was also an auspicious industrial area, with good transport and proximity to working-class suburbs. However, expansion in the centre of the Valley was beginning to reach its limits. The streets, created when the Valley was a small, semi-rural town, were too narrow to cope with the huge influx of traffic, including trams. The newly-amalgamated Brisbane City Council began to carry out urgently-needed street widening projects, resuming extensive areas of land in prominent areas. Old companies, such as McWhirters, designed large new premises to replace smaller buildings. New companies trying to take advantage of the Valley's popularity and industrial advantages moved in, erecting new buildings in the Valley, such as the New England Motor Company's car assembly plant and General Motors Ltd's service station. As a consequence, land values in Fortitude Valley skyrocketed. In 1923 a Brunswick Street property sold for a record £500 a foot, and in 1925 five shops in the centre of the Valley were sold for almost £40,000.

But as the Valley Corner and surrounding areas struggled with overcrowding, large amounts of land became available on the fringes of the Valley. Substantial family estates had dominated the area around Gregory Terrace in the 1800s, but from the early twentieth century, the estates were divided into smaller lots and sold. The Raff family's 'Grange Hill' estate, consisting of the 4-acre block along Gregory Terrace, Warry Street, Brunswick Street and Water Street, was one of the last large estates to be auctioned in 1921.

The affordability and location of the undeveloped 'Grange Estate' encouraged new businesses and residents to move to the outer areas of the Valley. It had the advantage of enabling businesses to construct large premises, without being too far from the Valley Corner. It was also well-situated for the Exhibition Grounds, where manufacturers could display their finished products, and for residents the proximity to the Victoria Park golf course and other leisure areas was a draw. Residences, particularly for city workers, began to emerge along Brunswick Street and business premises were constructed along Water Street. In 1923, Henry Roberts was in the process of building large warehouse and shop facilities on Water Street, while a veterinary hospital on the corner of Brunswick and Water Streets was purchased by Daniel Carr and developed as a motor garage. In the same year, Alexander Bell and wife Mary established their furniture manufacturing business, 'Bell Brothers', with plans for a workshop, show room and office on Water Street approved between February and April 1923, and constructed by Alexander Bell himself. The site was on a corner of a major intersection, with high visibility along Brunswick Street. Alexander Bell's purchase of sixteen perches on Water Street in the former Grange Hill estate was registered in December 1923.

Once completed, Bell Brothers' new building formed part of a small 'furniture precinct' on Water Street, with Henry Robert's 'Brunswick Home Furnishers' factory and showroom next door. The massive Rhoades and Co, which had a furniture showroom on Wickham street, also opened a store room on Water street. Other furniture manufacturing companies in the Valley provided more competition for Bell Brothers, including Crafti on Wickham Street, and Edmund Rosenstengel's business in Brunswick Street. Bell Brothers also had to contend with major department stores T.C Beirne, Foy and Gibson, Whincup and Company, and Overell, all of which could offer customers high-quality goods at reduced prices.

Despite the competition, Bell Brothers quickly became a prominent business, renowned for its solid, hand-crafted furniture and award-winning displays in the annual Royal Show. Two new cabinet-makers were hired in 1924, and in 1926 the Bells purchased an additional 1.13 perches of land to expand their business. Architect Sidney W. Prior called for tenders for the erection of brick premises on the corner of Water and Brunswick streets for Messrs Bell Brothers in March and April 1927. The design was advertised to have included structural steel and cantilever awnings. Additions were undertaken towards the end of 1927, and a new furniture factory was constructed in early 1929, both designed by Prior. By September 1929, Bell Brothers had become successful enough to register as a limited proprietary company, with £25,000 capital.

Bell Brothers' expansion was interrupted abruptly on Saturday 5 December 1931, when the premises was gutted by fire. The blaze caused a massive spectacle: thousands of people were reported to have stood outside in the dark and rainy night to watch the furniture factory burn, and photographs of the blaze were included in *The Brisbane Courier* on the following Monday. The fire had started in the Bell Brothers showroom and spread to adjacent buildings. Onlookers had attempted to move vehicles from Dan Carr's motor garage when it also caught and was destroyed. The fire was fierce enough to leap across the laneway to the Brunswick Home Furnishers showroom, but reinforcements from the city's fire brigades saved Roberts' property from the worst of the fire.

Bell Brothers suffered an estimated £10,000 worth of damage in the fire. The two-storey brick showroom and its contents, except for a single brick wall, were destroyed, as were the polishing section and upholstery rooms in the factory. The company held a salvage sale from temporary premises on the opposite side of Water Street, and in 1932 the Bells began the process of rebuilding.

Although Bell Brothers had used Sidney Prior for its constructions in the late 1920s, E.P. Trewern was commissioned to reinstate the business premises. The Victorian trained Eric Percival Trewern established his Brisbane architectural practice in 1920 at an address in Queen Street, Brisbane. The practice continued until Trewern's death in 1959. The height of his design success occurred in the interwar period and he is renowned for his innovative designs incorporating the Spanish Mission and the Old English/Tudor revival style in residential and commercial architecture. Amongst his finest residential designs is the New Farm house 'Santa Barbara' [601547], which is considered the best example of the Spanish Mission style in Brisbane. Trewern designed many commercial buildings in central Brisbane, most of which no longer exist. One important extant building is the Inchcolm Professional Chambers on Wickham Terrace [600170]. Trewern was also an active member of many prestigious architectural societies in the pursuit of improving professional architectural standards in Queensland.

Tenders were put out for the new Bell Brothers building in early 1932. Builders Tealby and Crick, with whom Trewern frequently worked in the late 1920s and early 1930s, had their tender accepted in April. The repairs were to cost £600. The new building was three storeys high, though it appeared to be only two from the outside. The new interior was constructed with New Guinea rosewood; and according to a former employee this was built by Mr Bell himself. The reconstruction was completed by June 1932, when another fire broke out in the factory, but this one caused only slight damage.

Bell Brothers' troubles continued in late 1933 when Edward Rosenstengel brought legal action against the company, alleging infringement of a registered design. However, Alexander and Mary Bell successfully defended the action, and Bell Brothers was back on its feet by 1934, when the firm won first prize for its array of household furniture at the Royal Show.

The US Navy leased the modern Bell Bros Furniture showroom & factory Building through the Australian Army Hirings Service (at Victoria Barracks) on 17 June 1943. This is a three-storey brick building. Each floor has an area of 2,100 square feet. The ground floor that has a prime commercial at the prominent Brunswick and Water Streets corner has two large show (display) windows on the Water Street side. The windows could also be seen by the tram, motor vehicle and pedestrian traffic passing along Brunswick Street.

The USN conducted four activities from this building. The US 7th Fleet's Photographic Developing Laboratory occupied the second floor of Bell Brothers until November 1944. On the ground floor, with its major display windows, was the USN War Bonds Issuing Office. War bonds were a government scheme where bonds were sold to the public or service personnel on the understanding that the money would be repaid with interest at the end of the war. War bonds were used to raise revenue to fund the war effort. The War Bonds Issuing Office occupied approximately 800 square feet of floor space. This USN organisation shared the ground floor with the Cap Boat Leave Office and USN Central Control Office of New Pay Procedures. It occupied the remainder of the ground floor, approximately 500 square feet.

In January 1945, in a review of its remaining Brisbane facilities, the USN recommended that the War Bonds Issuing Office, the Cap Boat Leave Office and the Central Control Office of New Pay Procedures be transferred to the Audio Visual Training Library Building at the USN Training Centre in Lammington Avenue, Newstead. The Bell Brothers Building would then be returned to Australian Army Hirings Service. The USN ended its lease in March 1945.

The business continued to be run by the Bell family for almost seventy years, supplying custom-made furniture to customers such as former Governor-General Bill Hayden. In 1988 Bell Brothers was purchased by Moreton Pacific and the company was wound up in 1990, although a branch of Bell Brothers continues to operate today in Newstead.

The modern building placed at the back of the site and behind the Bell Brothers office building has no heritage significance. During a fire in 1973, the original factory burnt down, leaving only the showroom still standing. However, the brick wall which stands adjacent to the building is significant, as the only remaining part of the original 1923 Bell Brothers building. From the 1990s, the building has been used for commercial purposes. A large advertising sign has been erected on top of the building.

Statement of significance

Relevant assessment criteria

This is a place of local heritage significance and meets one or more of the local heritage criteria under the Heritage planning scheme policy of the *Brisbane City Plan 2014*. It is significant because:

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history as a remnant of the significant commercial development that occurred in Fortitude Valley during the 1920's.

Aesthetic

CRITERION E

The place is important because of its aesthetic significance

as an attractive, architect-designed 1920s character building that contributes to the intersection of Brunswick and Water Streets.

Historical association

CRITERION H

The place has a special association with the life or work of a particular person, group or organization of importance in the city's or local area's history

as the showroom of successful and well-known Brisbane furniture company, Bells Brothers, for 65 years; and, as a building designed by important Brisbane architect Eric Percival Trewern.

References

1. Queensland Land Titles Office Records
 2. Queensland Certificates of Title
 3. Brisbane City Council, *Register of New Buildings*, 1923, 1926, 1932
 4. Interview with Mrs.Lindsay, long term employee at Bell Bros. (23, January 1990)
 5. Fortitude Valley Character and Heritage Study, 1995
 6. *The Brisbane Courier*, 1924-5, 1927-9, 1931-3
 7. *The Courier Mail*, 1933, 1988, 1994
 8. *Architectural and Building Journal of Queensland*, 1932
 9. Queensland State Archives Companies Index 1863-1959
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Note: This citation has been prepared on the basis of evidence available at the time including an external examination of the building. The statement of significance is a summary of the most culturally important aspects

of the property based on the available evidence, and may be re-assessed if further information becomes available. The purpose of this citation is to provide an informed evaluation for heritage registration and information. This does not negate the necessity for a thorough conservation study by a qualified practitioner, before any action is taken which may affect its heritage significance.

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