

Heritage Citation



Rathdonnell House

Key details

Addresses	At 14 Rathdonnell Street, Auchenflower, Queensland 4066
Type of place	Flat building, House
Period	Victorian 1860-1890
Style	Free Classical
Lot plan	L3_RP54265
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 July 2002 Date of Citation — September 2000
People/associations	Randall McDonnell (Occupant); Benjamin Joseph Backhouse (Architect)
Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (H) Historical association

Rathdonnell House, built for educationalist Randall McDonnell, is significant as a rare surviving example of a substantial brick 1860s residence. Although substantially altered, it demonstrates the early European settlement of Brisbane, and more specifically, Auchenflower, during the nineteenth century.

History

Rathdonnell House was one of the early grand residences established on large estates at Auchenflower in the nineteenth century. Constructed in brick between 1863 and 1865 for Randall MacDonnell, an Irish immigrant and educationalist, the house is thought to have been designed by prominent architect, Benjamin Joseph Backhouse. Although substantially altered and situated on much less than the original holding of 16 acres, *Rathdonnell House* provides important evidence of the early European settlement of the area.

By the 1860s, several substantial homes had been established in the Auchenflower area (then included in the district known as Milton). The first of these was *Milton House*, built in 1854 for Ambrose Eldridge, who experimented with cotton crops on his land. *Dunmore House*, the home of Robert Cribb, was constructed in the same year and the first *Moorlands Villa*, home of the Mayne family, was built in 1859. (Both houses have not survived. The present *Moorlands* was built in 1892.) Surviving residences built in the area in the 1860s include *Baroona*, at Rosalie (1866), *Lucerne* in (circa 1862) and the stone residence of *Bishopsbourne*, constructed in 1865-68 as the See house for Edward Tufnell, the first Anglican Bishop of Brisbane. *Baroona* and *Bishopsbourne* are also attributed to architect Benjamin Joseph Backhouse.

Backhouse was an English mason and architect who immigrated to the Victorian goldfields in 1852. He practised

in Ballarat and Geelong before moving to Brisbane in 1861, after a brief return to England. Backhouse soon established himself as a respected and prolific architect, taking public, private and ecclesiastical commissions of a wide variety. Other examples of his work include St Stephen's Cathedral (1863-67) and *Cintra* at Bowen Hills (1864-65). Backhouse was also an alderman for the North Ward and West Ward municipal councils in 1867 and 1868 respectively. At the end of 1868, he left Brisbane for Sydney where he continued his successful architectural career.

Randall MacDonnell was born and trained as a teacher in Dublin. He emigrated in 1853 to Sydney where he established a non-sectarian private high school in Paddington. After moving to Queensland in 1860, MacDonnell married Mary Sheehan of Brisbane. In 1862, Randall MacDonnell purchased 9 acres of land on elevated ground at Auchenflower for £135 from Arnold Weinholt. According to a 1931 newspaper article, the MacDonnell's estate at Auchenflower totalled 16 acres. MacDonnell commenced building his family home, *Rathdonnell House*, on the site in 1863. His involvement in local affairs included a position as the Chair of the Road Trust of Milton Road, which served to improve the road connection to the town centre and reduce the isolation of Milton/Toowong.

Upon moving to Queensland in 1860, MacDonnell was appointed the Inspector of Public Schools. Prior to Separation, he held an important position in the Education Department of New South Wales and was recommended as capable of "creating and administering a public school system worthy of the high aspirations of the first Parliament of Queensland". From 1870 to 1875, MacDonnell was also the Secretary to the Board of General Education. After the State Education Act was passed in 1875, he became the first general inspector of the new Department of Public Instruction. He retired from this position in 1876 after disagreements arose with Samuel Griffith, the Secretary of the Department over his duties.

Although a Catholic, MacDonnell was a staunch advocate of the separation of religious and secular education and played an role in the debate in Queensland over state aid to church schools. He was known to have clashed with the Catholic hierarchy over his religious and educational views, while his Catholic faith drew attacks from Tufnell, the Anglican bishop.

Rathdonnell House was built on an elevated piece of land near Milton Road with fine views to the developing township of Brisbane. An article on the house in the *Queenslander* in 1931 reported that the name *Rathdonnell* was that of a family home in Ireland and meant "Donnell's Hill". The original design of the house featured a transverse gable roof with a large central dormer window. According the *Queenslander*, the house originally had a slate roof and four main rooms, with 2 bedrooms and MacDonnell's study upstairs. The lattice design leadwork around the front door described in the *Queenslander* have survived in the present house, which has been much altered. The article also describes a separate kitchen and maids' room attached to the back verandah by a covered way and an orchard, stables and coachhouse on the property. The stables were later purchased by the Presbyterian Church and converted into a church. They are currently used as a Montessori kindergarten.

MacDonnell made an important contribution to the development of the education system in Queensland, playing a major role in the expansion of primary schools from 4 in 1860 to 263 in 1876, the commencement of the pupil-teacher scheme and the establishment of the Normal School. He died of tuberculosis in 1876 and was buried in Toowong cemetery.

After the death of Randall MacDonnell in 1876, his widow, Mary, and their sons continued to live at *Rathdonnell House*. In 1911, the land around the house was subdivided and sold by Cameron Bros as the Rathdonnell Estate. The MacDonnell's land to the north-east of *Rathdonnell House* (from present day Bangalla Street to Torwood Road) was also subdivided for sale in 1911 and was named the MacDonnell Estate. By this time, several other large properties in the area had been subdivided as residential estates including the Dunmore Estate to the east of Auchenflower railway station circa 1899 and the land around *Auchenflower House* in 1903.

Several allotments of the Rathdonnell Estate surrounding the house were purchased in 1912 by Mrs Evelyn Thomason, the wife of Henry Williams Thomason. Mrs Thomason reconfigured the lots around the house in 1917, resulting in a battleaxed shaped property with access from Rathdonnell Street. In 1939, some of the land on the north-western side of the property (the site of the tennis court) was subdivided and sold, reducing the size of the holding around *Rathdonnell House* to around 70 perches. Mrs Mary MacDonnell died in 1919.

Mrs Thomason's ownership of *Rathdonnell House* was to bring another dramatic change. By 1931, the home had been "modernised". The upper storey was extended and converted to flats, altering the distinctive roofline considerably, and some of the ground floor verandahs were enclosed. The 1931 *Queenslander* article, which published photographs of the house before and after the alterations, described some of the changes:

The detached kitchen building she has had moved from its original position and attached to the back verandah of the house. The skillion-roofed laundry at the back of the kitchen stands over what was the brick paving of the previous covered way between the house and the kitchen.

Mrs Thomason was the second wife of Henry Williams Thomason (1862-1946), a pharmaceutical chemist who emigrated from Birmingham to Queensland in 1885. Thomason Bros., chemists and dentists, established several outlets in Brisbane including businesses at the Woolloongabba Fiveways, Stones Corner and Victoria Place, South Brisbane. Henry Thomason and his second wife, Evlyn, had three children, all of whom grew up at *Rathdonnell House*. Evlyn and her husband were both musical, and according to one family member "the house was always filled with music". Evlyn played the violin in a quartette with her husband and in concerts at the Queensland Women's Club and the Victoria League of Queensland until shortly before her death in 1970. She was aged 90 when she died.

Rathdonnell House was sold by the Thomason family in 1943 and has since had several owners. During the 1950s, the house was registered as flats. According to one newspaper report published when the home was for sale in 1992, *Rathdonnell House* was at one stage a boarding house for "young ladies". During the late 1980s, the house was renovated and returned to a single residence. Parts of the house have since been rebuilt after the upper storey was damaged by fire in January 1999.

Description

This residence has had a large extension, but it has maintained the lower storey of the house.

The house was originally a two-storey brick dwelling with a smaller upper storey enclosed within the gable roof. It had a steep transverse gable corrugate iron roof with an integrated hip verandah roof. A corniced chimneystack also rose from the left and front elevation of the roof. A verandah area encircled the house on the lower level with paired posts, geometric verandah brackets and cross bracing at the top of the post in line with the bracketing. The verandah had no balustrades but the ground level was pushed up around the house to meet the edge of the verandah floor edge beam.

Several french doors and a timber main entry doors with diamond patterned leadlight windows to the side and above, still exist and provide access from the verandah to the house.

The residence later had the upper floor altered, was clad in stucco, had parts of the verandah space enclosed

and the roof form changed and terracotta tiles. A fire has also caused damage that has needed repair. Further additions are presently being made to the house.

Along the left side of the house several timber clad rooms, some with terracotta roofs and some with corrugated iron roofs are being added. To the front of this addition is a street facing gable with three casement windows with a simple hood. Some of the other windows have timber battened and bracketed corrugated iron hoods. On the upper level the casement windows have panels of leadlight similar to the diamond patterned leadlight windows around the front entry door. The chimneystack has been extended but simplified.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the house is its interiors, which retain most of the original architectural elements and decorative details.

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 one of the earliest surviving homes built on a large estate in the Auchenflower area during the nineteenth century.

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage

as a rare example of an 1860s brick residence in Brisbane.

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 a house constructed for Randall MacDonnell, a prominent, early, European resident in the Auchenflower area, who played an important role in the development of the Queensland education system during its formative years from the 1860s to 1870s.

References

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4. Department of Natural Resources. Queensland Certificates of Title and application no. 8903.Environmental Protection Agency, Entries on the Queensland Heritage Register, *Milton House*, 600253; *Old Bishopsbourne*, 600254
5. Gregory, Helen, (ed.). *Arcadian Simplicity: J.B. Fewings Memoirs of Toowong*. Brisbane: Library Board of Qld., 1990
6. Lawson, Ronald *Brisbane in the 1890s: A Study of an Australian Urban Society*. St Lucia U of Q Press, 1973
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8. A.Ward *Queensland Railway Heritage Places Study: Stage 2 Vol.4*. April 1997
9. Queensland Post Office Directories
10. *Queenslander*. 8 October 1931
11. Registrar-General's Office. Consolidated Deaths Index. 1915-1919. Microfiche held at John Oxley Library
12. *Sunday Sun*, 26 April 1992
13. Margaret Thomason, letter dated 8 Nov 1986

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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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