

Heritage Citation

Gerns Factory Residence

Key details

Addresses	At 39 Buhot Street East, Geebung, Queensland 4034
Type of place	House
Period	World War I 1914-1918
Style	Queenslander
Lot plan	L2_RP26134
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 July 2003 Date of Citation — May 2008
Construction	Roof: Corrugated iron; Walls: Timber
People/associations	Gerns family (Occupant)
Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (H) Historical association

This house was built in 1914 for Heinrich Gerns, who had established his smallgoods factory at Geebung in 1895. As Geebung had an established German farming community, Gerns, a German migrant, moved there from his Fortitude Valley home to protect his family from anti-German feeling in Brisbane during World War I. The Gerns family were prominent within the local area for more than 110 years.

History

After the collapse of the German Lutheran Mission at Zion's Hill (Nundah) in 1845, many of the missionaries spread north in search of suitable farmland. They gravitated towards local watercourses, such as Downfall Creek and Cabbage Cree Creek, to establish their farms, though Johan Leopold Zillman settled around a series of waterholes situated along the road leading to the hamlet of Sandgate. The whole district (including Geebung)

soon acquired the name of Zillman's Waterholes.

This property, though, was originally part of a purchase of freehold land made by William Shepherd in 1865. He purchased 18 acres (Lot 156) on 26 April and then a few weeks later, he expanded his holdings by obtaining a further 22 acres (Lot 157) on 8 May 1865. William transferred the entire 40 acres of land to Tom Shepherd on 17 May 1868. Increasing German migration into the district led to Hermann Pfingst (after whose family Pfingst Road is named) to buy Lots 156 and 157 on 7 April 1874. He transferred it to fellow German migrant Gottlieb Neumann (after whose family Newman Road is named) on 1 May 1877.

Two events in 1888 had a major impact on the development of the area. The construction of the Northern Railway saw a platform, shelter shed and rail office built on Robinson Road and given the name 'Geebung' (a corruption of an Aboriginal word for a local tree species); and James Carruthers Hutton had his ham and bacon factory built further north near the next rail stop, that was labelled as 'Zillmere'. Both events led to the division of the original large farm blocks into small farms that had become viable because they could send produce to either Hutton's factory or the Brisbane's Roma Street Markets, via the railway.

On 27 January 1881, Gottlieb Neumann had subdivided Lot 157 and transferred 10 acres (Subdivision 2 of Lot 157) to a family member, Gustav Neumann, of Kedron. On 12 October 1885, this land was sold to Edward Newton Daniell. The land was merely an investment property for Daniell, as he immediately mortgaged the site for £250 through the South Australian Land Mortgage and Agency Limited; plus he subsequently leased the property to German migrant Heinrich (Harry) Christian Gerns.

Gerns left Hanover, in Germany, with a load of cattle for delivery to New Hanover (New Ireland) then part of the colony of German New Guinea. After two unsuccessful attempts to deliver the cattle, Gerns proceeded onto Brisbane with his 18-year old bride, who had come over from Düsseldorf. Heinrich worked for a few years at the Hutton's factory, before establishing his own firm, the Vienna Sausage Company in a rented shop at the corner of Albert and Queen Streets in the CBD. He then moved to his own premises in Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley, where his family lived on the second floor, ran the shop on the ground floor and made sausages in the basement.

In 1895, Heinrich Gerns established a slaughter yard with holding pens on this land that had access to Neumann (Newman) Road, Geebung. Initially the meat was processed at his Fortitude Valley shop but by 1900, Gerns had expanded his business by having a small processing factory added to the Geebung site. The brick, smallgoods factory was constructed mainly from local materials, particularly from the nearby Virginia Brickworks. Pigs were herded off a siding situated along Geebung Station and then up Neumann Road into the paddocks on the site before being slaughtered and the meat processed in the factory. The resultant ham, bacon and sausage products were then sold by mail order or through the Gerns smallgoods shop in Fortitude Valley. His business did not attempt to compete with J.C. Hutton's larger ham factory, but instead, Harry Gerns served a niche market, by offering traditional German-style sausages, in comparison to Hutton's traditional English-style hams. His completed products were cured for three days, thereby greatly reducing the water content (water was scarce and came from a windmill that pumped water to the factory from Downfall Creek) and also inhibiting bacteria.

Gerns utilised the Geebung Railway Station to offer a mail order business that serviced far-western Queensland. The company's mettwurst and salami type smoked frankfurters became, claimed Edwin Gerns, a staple diet for boundary riders and jackeroos. The smallgoods orders would go by train from Geebung to as far as the end of the line at Cunnamulla, and then the mail orders would proceed by camel train as far as Thargomindah.

Edward Daniell had the property reclaimed by his mortgage provider on 15 February 1899. On 1 October 1908,

Harry Gerns was finally able to purchase his factory site from the South Australian Land Mortgage and Agency Limited.

But with the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, there was a rise of anti-German feeling in Brisbane. Thus, for example, Neumann Road had its name changed to Geebung Road. Possible internment or community harassment of his family was of concern to Harry Gerns. As his granddaughter Patricia Gerns recalled:

“...when they were interning them [Germans] and there was some talk in The Courier Mail about Germans still walking the streets and they mentioned some names and Heinrich Gerns was one...”¹

With Geebung and Zillmere already home to a thriving German farming community, Harry felt that it would be a better site to raise his family thereby avoiding any possible unpleasantness caused by the War. As amateur historian Kath Ballard noted:

“In Geebung it seemed different-and it was different. So they built a large family home with wide open verandahs and a view, adjacent to their Geebung factory.”²

Gerns had his new family home built next to the entrance to his existing Geebung smallgoods factory and holding pens site. It is claimed by the Gerns family that the house was constructed with the assistance of prison labour sent out to Geebung by a sympathetic prison official. Heinrich Gerns then moved his family out of their Fortitude Valley shop/house to their new home at Geebung.

To further protect his family and business from any anti-German feeling, Harry changed the company name from the Vienna Sausage Company to Gerns Brothers, and he handed over the running of his company to his three Australian-born sons. As well, after the Great War, Harry Gerns donated some land in Collins Street, Geebung for the site of a Memorial and Cricketers' Hall. He also donated £500 towards the building costs of the Geebung Memorial Hall, which was officially opened on 13 October 1923 by Sir Matthew Nathan GCMG PC.³ This is the current location of the Geebung/Zillmere RSL building.

After 1925, the Brisbane City Council requested Gerns to donate some land for a street that was to lead from Geebung (later Newman) Road up the hill to the Gerns smallgoods factory. As a result, Council also asked Gerns to think of a suitable name for this new street. Harry Gerns suggested to the Council officers, who were visiting his factory, that the street should be named after John Buhot, who was the first person to successfully refine sugar in Queensland. This was because sugar was an important component in the curing process used in the Gerns smallgoods. Heinrich Gerns had been the first Queenslanders to process sugar-cured ham, an imperative if his smallgoods were to outlast the Queensland climate, in the days before refrigeration. The Gerns family subsequently built a number of houses along Buhot Street during the Interwar period for family and factory workers, such that it became a small factory precinct.

Another contribution that the Gerns family made to Geebung was their involvement in having Brisbane's electricity grid extended to the area. It would have cost £325 to have an electricity supply connected just to the Gerns property that contained their smallgoods factory and family home.⁴ Heinrich's son Harold went throughout the Kedron Shire in 1926 to organise a local petition to have the electricity grid extended from the Lutwyche Cemetery on Gympie Road, Kedron out to Geebung. Harold managed to obtain signatures from 25% of the local population to support the petition and so power poles were erected along the main roads and in Buhot Street to the family home and factory. Harold also ensured that Buhot Street was one of the first paved residential streets in Geebung, though he used brickbats (broken bricks) from the Virginia Brickworks rather than bitumen. After

Heinrich (Harry) Gerns died on 2 April 1928, the property passed to Queensland Trustees Limited before it was divided equally between his sons, Harold Herod Gerns, Charles Bernhard Gerns and Leopold Frederick Gerns.

During World War II, Gerns smallgoods factory mainly supplied its speciality meats to the U.S. forces, as they were more familiar with salami and other German-style smallgoods as part of their servicemen's food requirements. U.S. servicemen would often arrive at the Geebung factory and begin slicing any meat that they required. Because it required heavy manual labour, Gerns factory offered little wartime employment for women workers, though as a protected industry, Gerns were allotted extra petrol coupons to ensure that the company could deliver its products. One minor contribution the Gerns family made to the war effort was their cylinder lawnmower. This was requisitioned by the U.S. forces to trim the lawns around their Brisbane bases but the Gerns never saw their lawnmower returned.

Since the post-World War II closure of the Butt's jam factory, Marsden's sawmill and Hutton's bacon factory, Gerns smallgoods factory remained the oldest surviving business in the Geebung/Zillmere district. It has continued to trade on its German origins with the company motto of "Ich Leiber Wust". The company has also traded on its longevity by using the slogan "Guaranteed Quality Since 1895". In the mid-1970s, some of the Gerns land was sold to the Queensland Government for the site of the Geebung Special School. The residence at 39 Buhot Street remained a Gerns family residence and was in the hands of members of the Gerns Family until 2007.

While, there are still remnants of the c1900 brick factory remaining in the existing factory building, this fabric is hard to distinguish due to the constant alterations and rebuilding of the factory. The Gerns family home is a more intact reminder of the important role that the Gerns family have played in Brisbane's history. In 2008, the family's significance was recognised by the renaming of Magenta Street Park at Wavell Heights as Heinrich Gerns Park.

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

built specifically in semi-rural Geebung for German migrant businessman Heinrich Gerns, in response to anti-German feeling in Brisbane during World War I.

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 family home of prominent Brisbane smallgoods manufacturers, the Gerns family.

References

1. Ford, Dr. Jonathan (Jack), *Marching to the Trains – the Chermside Army Camp Remembered*, (Brisbane: J. Ford, 2005), p. 16
2. Ballard, Kath, *Geebung Story – the Next 50 Years* (Geebung: K. Ballard, 1998), p.11
3. Ford, Dr. Jonathan (Jack), *Marching to the Trains – the Chermside Army Camp Remembered*, (Brisbane: J. Ford, 2005), p.22
4. Ford, Dr. Jonathan (Jack) & Keays, Dr. Sue, *Brisbane City Council and Geebung/Zillmere RSL Remembrance Corner Project*, transcript of telephone interview with Edwin Gerns, 11 November 1997, p.3
5. Ballard, Kath, *The Geebung Story – the Next 50 Years*, (Geebung: K. Ballard, 1998)
6. Brisbane City Council, *Properties on the Web*, post-1946 building approval cards
7. Brisbane City Council Aerial Photos 1946, 2001, 2005
8. Department of Natural Resources, Queensland Certificates of title and other records.
9. Ford, Jonathan (Jack), *Marching to the Trains – the Chermside Army Camp Remembered*, (Brisbane: Ford, 2005)
10. Ford, Dr. Jonathan (Jack) & Keays, Dr. Sue, *Brisbane City Council and Geebung/Zillmere RSL Remembrance Corner Project*, transcript of telephone interview with Edwin Gerns, 11 November 1997
11. Ford, Dr. Jonathan (Jack) & Keays, Dr. Sue, *Brisbane City Council and Geebung/Zillmere RSL Remembrance Corner Project*, transcript of interview with Edward Gerns, Rhonda Eugene Gerns and Patricia Vera Gerns, 3 December 1997
12. Gerns Edwin, company archival material including newspaper clippings supplied to the Heritage Unit in 2002
13. *Northside Chronicle*, 23 April 2008

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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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