

Heritage Citation



McWhirters Bulk Store (former)

Key details

Addresses	At 47 Warner Street, Fortitude Valley, Queensland 4006
Type of place	Warehouse
Period	Interwar 1919-1939
Style	Stripped Classical
Lot plan	L1_SP214154; L2_SP214154; L3_SP214154; L4_SP214154; L5_SP214154; L6_SP214154; L7_SP214154; L8_SP214154; L5_SP198092; L4_SP193209; L822_SP192737; L2_SP193207; L3_SP193210; L813_SP192741; L5_SP193201 ; L6_SP193211; L4_SP193212; L106_SP196993; L119_SP196969; L811_SP192742; L812_SP192742; L1_SP193199; L1_SP193204; L101_SP196984; L107_SP196982; L108_SP196982; L810_SP192742; L120_SP196969

Key dates Local Heritage Place Since — 30 October 2000
Date of Citation — July 2010

Construction Walls: Face brick

People/associations James McWhirter and the firm of McWhirter & Son Ltd (later McWhirters Ltd) (Association);
Thomas Ramsay Hall (Architect)

Criterion for listing (A) Historical; (A) Historical; (A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (H) Historical association;
(H) Historical association

This building was constructed to serve as McWhirters bulk store in 1919, a time in which the company, which ran one of the largest department stores in Brisbane, was undergoing expansion. From the late 1920s it also housed McWhirters mail order despatch centre, catering not only for country and interstate orders but also suburban orders, following the abolition of Friday night trading in Brisbane. The building was designed by prominent architect Thomas Ramsay Hall, who had also designed McDonnell and East's department store as well as the McWhirter garage on Ballow Street, and later designed the iconic five-storey building on Brunswick and Wickham Streets for McWhirters.

History

The drapery firm of James McWhirter and Son Ltd was founded in 1898. Business commenced in a single shop fronting Brunswick Street, but quickly expanded to include other retail. James McWhirter senior had been employed by T.C. Beirne, another draper in Fortitude Valley, before establishing his own business. Competition between the two major retailers played out over the twentieth century, with their stores facing each other across Brunswick Street.

By the early twentieth century, McWhirters was one of the three largest Valley retailers, alongside TC Beirne and Overells. Following the disastrous 1890s floods which drove south side retailers to the north side, the Valley became the shopping hub for greater Brisbane, rivalled only by the city centre itself. McWhirters flourished as a family department store, its many customers attracted by a high quality of goods, variety of merchandise and moderate prices. The store's shop windows, especially at Christmas, became a Fortitude Valley attraction.

The massive trade of McWhirter and Son necessitated expansion during this period. Large buildings and additions were undertaken in 1912, 1923 and 1930-31. These buildings engulfed one side of the 'Valley Corner', taking up most of the block fronting Wickham, Warner and Brunswick Streets. These buildings are all listed together on the State Heritage Register.

McWhirters' development was not limited to Fortitude Valley. James McWhirter's sharp business acumen had enabled him to expand his business to branches throughout Queensland. McWhirters worked on the principle that 'distance shall be no bar to trade'. It had a large number of Queensland country clients and regularly sent parcels to customers in New South Wales, South Australia and New Guinea. The firm was renowned for its postal service for country customers and produced regular catalogues for mail orders. Similarly, the large city-

based drapery firm of McDonnell and East's advertised itself as the 'Home of the Mail Order' in 1918, while T.C. Beirne had a rural store in Mackay.

Expansion of McWhirters around the late 1910s seems to have focused on catering for this business: the firm's garage, from which many parcels would have been delivered, was built in 1918 in nearby Ballow Street.

McWhirters had contributed greatly to the attraction of Friday night shopping in the Valley in the early 1900s. However, in 1908 a Shop Assistants' Wages Board was established, and in the following years agitation to abolish Friday night trading and to reinstate the 48 hour week, grew. The Drapers' Association, which included McWhirters, agreed in 1916 to cease their Friday night trading, foreshadowing the 1917 stipulation that overtime rates had to be paid for Friday night shopping, in effect abolishing Friday night shopping. To counteract the reduction in trading hours, McWhirters advertised the introduction of a suburban section of their Mail Order Department, for the convenience of customers. In reality, the loss of Friday night trading does not seem to have harmed most of the Valley firms, who were reported not to want re-establish Friday night trading, and whose takings increased after the abolition. The success of the mail order department can be seen in the 1918 purchase of the Warner Street site on which the bulk store was built.

In 1918 McWhirter and Son purchased the Warner Street site. It had been owned from 1913 by T.C. Beirne, although it was not used as part of Beirne's retail business, but rather the location of the Elite Skating Palace.

On 25 September 1918 plans for the new brick warehouse on Warner Street were registered, though they were not approved until 20 December. The architect, Thomas Ramsay Hall of Queen St and contractor, Henry Roberts of Adelaide St, had been employed to construct the Ballow Street garage earlier in 1918. Hall was a prominent Brisbane architect from a family of prominent Brisbane architects: John Hall, his father, designed buildings for the Queensland National Bank and private residences including 'Greylands', 'Langlands' and 'Pahroombin', while Francis Richard Hall, his half-brother, was in practice with Robin Dods as Hall and Dods.

T.R. Hall contributed significantly to the architectural design of Brisbane and Queensland, as a solo practitioner (with designs including the Castlemaine Perkins Building in Adelaide St (1918-19), McDonnell and East Limited Building (1912-1928) and the Sandgate Town Hall (1911-12)); with partner GG Prentice (most notably City Hall (1930), Our Lady of Victories Catholic Church (1924-5)); and with later partner LB Phillips (Gayndah Shire Hall (1935), Southport Bathing Pavillion (1934) and the Southport Town Hall (1935)). Hall, 'well and popularly known in Brisbane', also worked with Henry and D.F. Roberts on developments of McWhirters in 1914, where his 'considerable technical resource' was considered invaluable on the intricate remodelling scheme.

As Hall formed an architectural firm with GG Prentice in 1919, Prentice may also have contributed to the design of the McWhirters bulk store.

The McWhirters Bulk Store was completed in 1919. Four storeys high, spacious and imposing, it afforded 'convincing evidence of the wonderful growth of that firm's [McWhirter and Son] business.' It was considered 'decidedly attractive' and appreciated for its 'thorough modernity'. A dock on the ground floor was connected to the upper storage levels by an electric lift, with electric lighting and fire sprinklers installed throughout the building. A lunch room for the employees took up half a floor, making it large enough to be considered for dances and socials. A tower above the roof was capped with a concrete water tank. The total floor space was 46,000 square feet.

The completion of the bulk store unfortunately coincided with the death of James McWhirter, son of the founder. James junior died in Sydney in September 1919. McWhirters Limited was incorporated in the following year. James senior lived only a few years longer, dying in 1925. However the success of McWhirters continued well into the first half of the twentieth century: in 1928 McWhirters earned a record profit of ?77,888, with more settled

earnings of ?37,072 by June 1940. In 1949 the turnover of Valley residents was estimated at ?15 million each year, of which McWhirters, T.C. Beirne's and Overells accounted for more than ?5 million.

In the late 1920s, the mail order business and packing department were moved into the building. Business had grown so significantly in the 1920s that it was seen as more beneficial to relocate the department into separate and larger premises. This also had the advantage of locating the mail order department conveniently close to the Ballow Street motor garage, from which the parcels were sent. However, the building was also used for events outside its normal business: it was the location for a wireless concert and horticultural exhibit in 1925. In 1933, the bulk store was the site of distribution of free Christmas hampers donated by McWhirters to those suffering the effects of the Depression. 5,000 people arrived on Christmas morning to claim a hamper.

Architect T.R. Hall was retained for the McWhirters 1930-31 addition, with new partner G.G. Phillips. The striking building on the Wickham and Brunswick Street corner, joined the two existing buildings and was built by G.A. Stronach. This five-storey addition provided another 250,000 square feet (a little more than two hectares) of floor space at a cost of ?130,000.

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 it demonstrates the expansion of McWhirters from a small shop in 1898 to a vast emporium.

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history as it demonstrates the importance of Fortitude Valley as a retail business centre in the first decades of the century.

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history for its ability to demonstrate the importance of mail order shopping earlier this century.

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage as an example of the vanished power of early family-owned Fortitude Valley retail stores.

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

for its special association with the life and work of James McWhirter and the firm of McWhirter & Son Ltd (later McWhirters Ltd).

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

for its association with its designer, Thomas Ramsay Hall.

References

1. Queensland Land Title Records
2. Post Office Directories.

3. E.J.T. Barton (ed), *Jubilee History of Queensland*, Brisbane, H.J. Diddams & Co, 1910, p. 309
 4. *Brisbane Centenary Official Historical Souvenir*, 1924, p. 270
 5. *The Brisbane Courier*, 1914-5, 1917, 1919, 1925
 6. *The Courier Mail* 1933
 7. *Sydney Morning Herald* 1941
 8. DERM, Queensland Heritage Register Entry, Maryborough Boys Grammar School [600697]
 9. Allom Lovell (Architects) *McWhirters: A Conservation Plan and Impact Study for the Micdor Jezer Group*, 1998
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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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