

Heritage Citation



Rocklea Munitions Works - Laboratory (former)

Key details

Addresses	At 21 Engineering Street, Salisbury, Queensland 4107
Type of place	Defence site
Period	World War II 1939-1945
Style	Stripped Classical
Lot plan	L2_RP108005
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2005 Date of Citation — September 2008

Construction	Roof: Terracotta tile; Walls: Face brick
People/associations	Civil Construction Corps (Builder); Department of the Interior Works and Services Branch (Architect)
Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (C) Scientific; (D) Representative; (H) Historical association

The Rocklea Munitions Works Laboratory was constructed in 1942-43 and was one of approximately eighty buildings that comprised the Rocklea Munitions Works. It was constructed 18 months after the main buildings, but was not even fully equipped when the decision was made to move the Munitions Works over to the Department of Aircraft Production. The building was subsequently converted into offices for General Motors Holden at the end of 1943, and from 1963 was occupied by ComEng.

History

The Rocklea Munitions Works

Consisting principally of two Small Arms Ammunition (SAA) plants, known together as SAA Factory No. 5, and a cartridge case factory, the Rocklea Munitions Works (RMW) was established to supply ammunition to the Eastern Supply Group. Although at the time Queensland was strategically vulnerable, construction of a munitions facility in Brisbane was undertaken to decentralise production and take advantage of an available workforce. Between March 1942 and October 1943 a total of 137,729,208 million rounds of small arms ammunition were produced at the RMW, as well as 1,221,122 brass cartridge cases for 25-pounder shells.

The RMW was constructed on land to the north and south of Evans Road, then known as Compo Road. Prior to the Second World War, although suburban development was slowly occurring on the area, the predominant land usage was still primary production. South of Compo Road James Greer and Ernest Barstow had operated slaughter yards on their respective properties backing on to Rocky Water Holes Creek. The establishment of a Queensland Meat Industry Board and the operation of an abattoir at Cannon Hill as a State utility for the City of Brisbane led to the closure in the early 1930s of private slaughter yards such as those in Compo Road. For the next decade the land was used for grazing purposes.

North of Compo Road, Kathleen Quine, Elijah and Alice Beckett and Janet Jensen operated poultry farms during the interwar years. James Greer also owned land on the north of Compo Road. In expectation of residential growth, Greer had subdivided his 16 acre Portion 205 into 67 allotments. By late 1940 none had sold.

As likelihood of war became more apparent, the Minister of Defence announced a rearmament program. This first period of expansion from December 1938 focused on southern states where both raw materials and labour were in close proximity. In June 1940 a second round of munition factory building commenced. A new SAA factory was constructed at Hendon, South Australia, and a cartridge case factory at Finsbury, also in South Australia.

Early in 1941 the Commonwealth announced that an initial £1,500,000 would be spent in the construction of a Small Arms Ammunition factory at Rocklea, Queensland. The Director-General of Munitions, Essington Lewis, chose the Compo Road site on advice from Department of Munitions officers during a visit on 22 January 1941. The site was considered favourable because it was reasonably flat and above flood level, could be provided readily with road, rail, electricity, water and gas services and was accessible to populated areas.

From February 1941 the Works and Services Branch of the Department of the Interior prepared the plans needed for the RMW. As some of the Small Arms Ammunition section was to be a duplication of factories in southern states, Department of Interior Officer Clive Heath made a hurried visit to Melbourne to study already established Small Arms Ammunition factories. Where possible plans were sourced from Victoria or traced off pre-existing plans. The Small Arms Ammunition factory at Rocklea commenced operations in November 1941, ten months after the site was chosen. The cost of completing the buildings, works, services, air raid precautions and camouflage at the Munitions Works amounted to £989,288.

Establishment of the Rocklea Munitions Works involved:

- Extensive surveying and earthworks by the Queensland Main Road Commission.
- Extending the tram service along Compo Road, work conducted by the Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Main Road Commission.
- Upgrading of water supply and electricity services, including the establishment of two new substations by the Brisbane City Council.
- Construction of approximately 80 buildings. Private contractors and the Civil Construction Corps completed this work.
- Production of the tools, gauges, presses and other engineering machinery needed for gun cartridge making. The Queensland Railway Workshops and prominent Queensland engineering firms assisted in this area of expertise.

As preparation of the site progressed, Department of Munitions officers sought financial approval for expenditure of over £1.6 million on stores, raw materials, plant, machinery, equipment and installation work.

JD O'Shea of the Ammunition Factory at Footscray in Victoria was appointed manager of the Rocklea Works on 1 January 1941. Other staff, notably engineers, came from Victorian munitions establishments and private industry. Technical staff were recruited in Queensland. JB Affleck was Chief Accountant. Special training in Melbourne was provided for twelve appointed Queensland accountants. The factory's business administrator was RJ Bright. He was assisted by metallurgist GR Donaldson. The assistant manager was FE Allen, formerly of the Colonial Sugar Refinery. Following interviews in February 1941 fourteen toolmakers, twenty-two trade workers, twenty-eight process workers and fifty-six 'female operators' were chosen for six months training in Melbourne.

The Queensland Main Roads Commission commenced the cutting and filling ground work for the first large building on site, the SAA factory building (now 32 Commerce Street, Salisbury), on 10 March 1941. The first production lot of 200,000 rounds of cartridge SA Ball .303 inch Mk VII was submitted for Army inspection in February 1942. Other types of ammunition produced included cartridge SA Revolver .455 inch MK II, cartridge SA revolver .455 inch Mk VI and cartridge SA revolver .380 inch Mk II. Production units were as follows:

Cartridge SA Ball .303 Inch Mk VII 127,310,520
Cartridge SA Revolver .455 Inch MK II 162,600
Cartridge SA Revolver .455 Inch Mk VI 1,735,200
Cartridge SA Revolver .380 Inch Mk II 8,520,888
Total 137,729,208

In addition the SAA factory reconditioned and repacked American ammunition, some of which had been salvaged from a wreck site. This involved 'rumbling' the ammunition in granulated cork.

The largest building within the Munitions Works was the QF Case Shop, on which foundation work commenced in May 1941. Manufacture of the 25 pounder QF Case Mk II commenced in April 1942. Under the one roof covering 6.25 acres were two cartridge case plants, each plant capable of producing 1 million cases per annum on a one-shift basis.

Although initially planned for the Ipswich Railway Workshops, the manufacture of Shell QF Smoke 25 pounder Mk III was shifted to Rocklea. Production commenced in a small way in July 1943 but was soon wound down. In August 1943 this section of the Works was removed to Rutherford, NSW.

At its peak the Rocklea Munitions Works employed approximately 3,000 people. The larger Footscray factory in Melbourne, by comparison, employed over 9,000. The peak for Rocklea was reached in May 1943 when 926 men and 1,573 women were recorded as engaged in factory work. An additional 500 men and women worked in the associated areas of Army inspection, food services, medical and welfare. Absenteeism was a problem. The reasons blamed for this included the introduction of night shifts, the regimentation of the work, industrial fatigue and lack of proper meals.

From mid-1943, with the threat of invasion removed and less projected demand for munitions, planning commenced for the conversion of the munitions works buildings to the overhaul of aircraft engines. In November 1943 Cabinet approved £385,000 for this task. Munitions equipment was to be removed from buildings by that same month.

Aircraft engine overhaul at the Rocklea works commenced early in 1944. Banks of sound-proofed engine testing stands were constructed at the eastern end of Evans Road. Unfortunately, the demand for aero engine overhaul had by then decreased. A number of the former Munitions Works buildings were then turned over to the military for use as storage facilities. By the conclusion of the war eighty-two of the buildings within the former Rocklea Munitions Works were occupied by the Department of the Army, the Royal Navy and the Department of Aircraft Production.

Postwar, the former Rocklea facility was viewed as a significant site for future manufacturing and industry. In 1947 the Queensland Government commenced a progressive purchase of the site, commencing with the area north of Evans Road. By 1947 there were fifty-six tenants on the industrial estate occupying 500,000 square feet (46.45 square metres) of floor space with over 700 employees.

Former Laboratory (Building 54)

The former Laboratory of the Rocklea Munitions Works was constructed eighteen months after the main buildings, with the plans being drawn by JS Edwards of the Department of Interior in Victoria during September and October 1942. This delay was the consequence to two alterations to the munitions programme. Initially it had been planned to build a Shell Factory for the manufacture of 600,000 smoke shells (25 pounder) per annum at the Ipswich Railway Works. The location was altered to Rocklea and a decision made to construct at Rocklea a Foundry and Rolling Mill to provide strip for the 25 pounder case. These decisions called for an up-to-date

Laboratory.

To equip the Laboratory, financial approval for equipment to the value of £7,400 was obtained. Not much use may have been made of the equipment as installation of plant in the Foundry and Rolling Mill was only one third complete when the decision was made to transfer the Munitions Works to the Department of Aircraft Production.

In December 1943 the Rocklea Munitions Works was taken over by the Department of Aircraft Production. Following this transfer the Laboratory was converted to offices for General Motors Holden, which was to use the former case factory and machine shop nearby (building 27) for the overhaul of aero engines. Improved circumstances in the Pacific theatre of war, however, curtailed the need for an engine overhaul facility this extensive.

In the mid-1940s sections of the former Rocklea Munitions Works became the Salisbury Industrial Estate. The Commonwealth Engineering Company Limited, after 1963 ComEng Holdings, occupied approximately ten of the larger 'store' buildings. Commonwealth Engineering designed and constructed railway passenger cars and rolling stock for Queensland Railways and adapted the former RMW Laboratory as its administration and design offices. In 2004 the building was occupied by Lanskey.

Description

The former Rocklea Munitions Works laboratory (Building 54) is a single-storey brick and concrete-render building constructed in 1942-43 to house the chemical and metal testing facilities necessary to support the Foundry and Rolling Mill which produced strip for 25-pounder shells. Balanced in its external appearance, the building has a west-facing main entry, today obscured by a brick wall. The roof features a central ventilation cupola.

Internally the building has been renovated at least twice since its construction. Remaining features such as the four 'balance cupboards', formed in concrete and believed to have housed precision scales, provide an indication to the original purpose of the building. Externally some sections of the western side of the building have been modernised. The brickwork has been painted.

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 substantial building within the former Rocklea Munitions Works.

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage as a purpose-built laboratory constructed for the only Second World War munitions works established in Queensland.

Scientific

CRITERION C

The place has the potential to yield information that will contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the city's or local area's history as a substantial building in an area which has served both wartime and postwar industrial expansion.

Representative

CRITERION D

The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or classes of cultural places for its construction detail and those features which identify it as a munitions works laboratory.

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 role over forty years as the administration office for Commonwealth Engineering, later ComEng.

References

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3. Brisbane City Council Minutes, 1940-44, 1947-48
4. Brisbane City Council Water Supply and Sewerage Detail Plans
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7. *Courier Mail*, 15 March 1941, 31 March 1941, 21 April 1941
8. Department of Natural Resources, Queensland Certificates of title and other records.
9. Environmental Protection Agency
10. JOL Estate Map Collection and photographic collection
11. National Australian Archives (Queensland)
12. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 1; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 1
13. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 1B; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 1B
14. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 2; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 2
15. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 3; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 3
16. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J2682; W6186 to QS3128; Register of architectural plans and sketch plans, single number
17. National Australian Archives (Victoria)
18. National Australian Archives (Victoria), Series MP438/3/0; S/43; History of the Ammunition Factory Rocklea Queensland
19. Queensland Main Roads Commission, *A history of the Queensland Main Roads during World War Two 1939-1945*
20. Trotter, Robin and Colin Mercer, Historical study: Cannon Hill Saleyards
21. Queensland Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning, Joint Ventures Management Group, 1995

22. Ross, A. T. *Armed and ready: The industrial development and defence of Australia 1900-1945*. Sydney: Turnton & Armstrong, 1995
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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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