

Heritage Citation



Rocklea Munitions Works - S.A.A. Mess (former)

Key details

Addresses	At 18 Chrome Street, Salisbury, Queensland 4107
Type of place	Defence site
Period	World War II 1939-1945
Lot plan	L1_RP140264
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2005 Date of Citation — August 2009
Construction	Roof: Corrugated iron; Walls: Brick - Painted

People/associations	Civil Construction Corps (Builder); Horace George Driver (Architect)
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Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (C) Scientific; (D) Representative; (H) Historical association
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This Mess building was constructed in 1941 and was an important component of the most northerly munition works complex constructed in Australia in World War II – the Rocklea Munitions Works. This Mess employed Brisbane staff to provide a safe rest and eating area for the thousands of local munitions workers who had to keep the complex operating 24-hours per day.

History

Prior to the Second World War, although suburban development was slowly occurring in Rocklea, the predominant land usage was still primary production. South of Compo Road (renamed post war as Evans 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.

By the late 1930's, as the likelihood of war became more apparent, the Minister of Defence announced a rearmament program. This first period of expansion from December 1938 focused on the 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 Small Arms Ammunition (SAA) factory was constructed at Hendon, South Australia, and a cartridge case factory at Finsbury, also in South Australia.

At the start of 1941, the Commonwealth announced that an initial £1,500,000 would be spent in the construction of a Small Arms Ammunition factory at Rocklea. The Commonwealth Director-General of Munitions (and BHP Director) 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 and existing roads and the Salisbury tramline serviced it. The Rocklea site could be quickly developed with rail, electricity, and water and gas services. It was accessible to Brisbane's urban areas from which a workforce could be drawn.

From February 1941, the Works and Services Branch of the Department of the Interior prepared the plans needed for the Rocklea Munitions Works. 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 Queensland Main Roads Commission commenced the cutting and filling groundwork for the first large building on site, the SAA factory building (now 32 Commerce Street,

Salisbury), on 10 March 1941. As preparation of the Rocklea 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. Many technicians were recruited from within Queensland. Following local interviews in February 1941, 14 toolmakers, 22 trade workers, 28 process workers and 56 'female operators' were chosen for six months advanced training in Melbourne. JB Affleck was Chief Accountant. Special training in Melbourne was provided for twelve appointed Queensland accountants. The factory's business administrator was RJ Bright. Metallurgist GR Donaldson assisted him. The assistant manager was FE Allen, formerly of the Colonial Sugar Refinery.

The cost of completing the buildings, works, services, air raid shelters and camouflage at the Rocklea Munitions Works amounted to £989,288. It "was one of the largest industrial complexes erected in Queensland during World War II."¹ The establishment of the RMW had been a major undertaking for the Queensland Government and the Brisbane City Council undertaken during a period of wartime labour and equipment shortages. It had involved extensive surveying and earthworks by the Queensland Main Road Commission. The Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Main Road Commission had extended the tram service along Compo Road. The Brisbane City Council had upgraded the water supply and electricity services to Rocklea. This work had included the establishment of two new BCC substations. Approximately 80 buildings, sheds and other structures (guard huts, air raid shelters, railway sidings, a railway bridge over Rocky Water Holes Creek) had to be constructed for the RMW complex, with the Civil Construction Corps and private contractors undertaking this task. The Queensland Railway Workshops at Ipswich and prominent Queensland engineering firms manufactured the tools, gauges, presses and other specialist engineering machinery needed for gun cartridge making at the RMW.

The Small Arms Ammunition factory at Rocklea commenced operations in November 1941, ten months after the site was chosen. The outbreak of the Pacific War on 8 December 1941, prompted the Rocklea Munitions Works to enter full production. The first production lot of 200,000 rounds of cartridge SA Ball .303 inch Mk VII was submitted for Army inspection in February 1942. The capacity of the RMW was expected to reach the production 220 million rounds of small-arms ammunition in a full year.² 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 artillery shells. The .303 round was standard ammunition for the Lee Enfield SMLE rifle, the Bren light machine gun (LMG) and the water-cooled Vickers heavy machine gun (HMG) used by the Australian Army and also by the Royal Australian Air Force. The 25-pounder field gun had become the standard artillery weapon used by the Australian Army, with an Australian cut-down version of this field gun having been adapted for use in the Papua New Guinea jungle.

On 30 March 1942, the Allied Joint Chiefs of Staff had created a new command structure for conducting the Pacific War. Australia became part of the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) Command under US General Douglas MacArthur, with his headquarters (HQ) in Melbourne. In order to be closer to the Papua New Guinea frontline, MacArthur transferred his headquarters to Brisbane on 20 July 1942. This made Brisbane a major garrison and headquarters city, similar in importance to Bombay, India (South East Asia Command HQ) and Pearl harbour, Hawaii (Central Pacific Command HQ). The importance of the RMW had correspondingly increased, as it was closest Australian ammunition manufacturing plant to the frontline at a time when the majority of MacArthur's troops were drawn from the Australian Army.

Although initially planned for the Ipswich Railway Workshops, the manufacture of artillery ammunition Shell QF Smoke 25 pounder Mk III was shifted to the RMW. Smoke shells were important as they were used to mark a

target for an artillery battery or to mask an attack or retreat. Production of these types of artillery rounds commenced in a small way in July 1943 but was soon wound down. In August 1943, this section of the RMW was removed to Rutherford, NSW. Other types of ammunition were produced at the RMW. These 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 RMW 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.

At its peak, the Rocklea Munitions Works employed approximately 3,000 people. By comparison, the larger Footscray factory in Melbourne had over 9,000 staff. The RMW staffing peak occurred in May 1943 when 926 men and 1,573 women were recorded as engaged in factory duties. 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. Fatigue came from the work being arduous, dangerous and often tedious. As the war neared its end, staff morale began to be affected by the RMW workers' concern about their post war employment prospects. This was especially the case with the women workers who faced the prospect of a return to the pre war restrictions on the employment of married women.

From mid-1943, with the threat of Japanese invasion averted there was less than the projected demand for munitions. The last munitions production at the RMW occurred in October 1943. Planning had already commenced for the conversion of the munitions works buildings for the new purpose to the overhaul of aircraft engines. The Curtin Government wished to keep the RMW in operation as the Commonwealth had a decentralisation policy "of assisting the less populated states and country areas."³ The Department of Aircraft Production conducted the conversion of the RMW. In November 1943, Cabinet approved £385,000 for this task. Munitions equipment was to be removed from buildings by that same month. The RMW particularly undertook engine overhauls for the 5th United States Army Air Force (USAAF). As the official history noted:

"The Rocklea conversion was the largest undertaken on behalf of the Americans [amongst Australian plants] in the aircraft maintenance field. General Motors-Holden's and Ford combined to transform the small arms factory in a manner suitable for engine overhaul, and a special test centre was built outside the metropolitan area. The large number of workers moved into the area made necessary the construction of special hostels and canteen facilities, and a bus service was provided the Maintenance Division of the Department of Aircraft Production."⁴

By 1944, 25% of Australia's aircraft industry was devoted to maintenance work for American aircraft.⁵ This increasing demand for extra canteen services would have impacted upon the Mess building. RMW not only contributed to the war effort through its munitions production and aircraft engine maintenance work but it also assisted in reducing Australia's war debt by providing aid to the USA through Reciprocal Lend Lease.

Aircraft engine overhaul at the Rocklea works commenced early in 1944. Banks of soundproofed engine testing stands were constructed at the eastern end of Evans Road. In April 1944, the US forces moved their headquarters to its new base at Hollandia in Dutch New Guinea. From that time the war moved further away from Australia, as Macarthur followed his strategy of liberating the Philippines. As a result, the demand for USAAF aero engine overhaul gradually decreased. A number of the former Rocklea Munitions Works buildings were then turned over to the military for use as storage facilities. By the conclusion of the war in September 1945, 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.

Post war, 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.

The Rocklea Munitions Works complex was a major boost to Brisbane's post-war industrial development. Its construction, along with other World War Two buildings elsewhere in Brisbane, provided the city with the facilities to shrug off its pre-war focus on providing support facilities for Queensland's primary industries. The RMW immediately altered the character of the surrounding semi-rural suburbs.

"The quiet farming orientated pattern of development for Salisbury was shattered by drastic light and heavy industrial development provoked by World War II. Evans Road developed into munitions factories during the war and after peace was declared, with the aid of the State Government, industrial development surged ahead. The suburbs surrounding Moorooka and Salisbury became increasingly residential to house the workforce needed in the industrial complex."⁶

The SAA Mess Building (former) at 18 Chrome Street

The SAA Mess on the northern side of Evans Road was one of two large Mess buildings constructed to accommodate munitions workers. The SAA Mess building could seat 200 men and 800 women. A concrete air raid shelter was built in the rear yard of the SAA Mess as a civil defence measure. As an added safety measure, its entrance was placed facing away from the SSA Mess Building (and possible bombing target). This air raid shelter is now in a very dilapidated condition due to its use as an ad-hoc incinerator. The other large Mess building was the QF Mess. The QF Mess (since demolished) was constructed in two blocks with an adjoining corridor on the southern side of Compo Road and was designed to cater for 1,100 munitions workers. The RMW administrative staff had separate, smaller Mess buildings on the northern side of the complex.

Plans for the SAA Mess were completed in May 1941. The purchase of property containing the SAA Mess Building was finalised by the Federal Government of Prime Minister John Curtin on 13 March 1942. The building's architect was Horace G Driver. Born in Brisbane in 1902, Driver worked as an articled pupil and draftsman before completing a Diploma in Architecture in 1924. The following years were spent in working and studying in San Francisco, Chicago and New York. On return to Brisbane circa 1930 he was registered as an architect, opening a practice first at Auchenflower (until 1934) then in the City. He died in 1982.

All RMW staff members were required to bring their own meals to work but they had to eat their meals at their designated Mess Building. Hot water for tea, coffee or hot chocolate was provided in the Mess buildings, along with other facilities such as some crockery and cutlery and washing-up items. Due to the effects of wartime food rationing, it became increasingly difficult for the munitions workers to obtain the ingredients to vary their prepared meals. Tea coupons were introduced on 1 April 1942. Sugar rationing started in August 1942. Meat coupons were issued in May 1943. Butter began to be rationed on 7 June 1943. Some items such as chocolate and

flavouring essence had become largely unobtainable. The monotony of the meals and the poor quality of the food contributed to a lowering of workers' morale.

There was an important safety issue behind the provision of on-site messes for the munitions workers. The Rocklea Munitions Works operated 24-hours a day on three 8-hour shifts. Women were to be employed on two shifts per day while male workers operated on all three shifts. But with Australia facing the threat of Japanese invasion in 1942, men and women sometimes "worked all day or all night."⁷ This meant that the Messes also operated day and night to meet for the differing lunch and tea breaks allotted to each shift. As well, it was a requirement that workers have their breaks in the Mess buildings. Given the three different shifts, the Mess provided breakfast, lunch and tea (dinner) facilities. A lack of concentration while eating and talking to other workers, as well as the almost universal pastime of cigarette smoking, could endanger workers whilst they were engaged in ammunition manufacture. The Mess was the only safe place to relax at this dangerous workplace. It became a social centre for the RMW. Noticeboards provided information on matters affecting the workplace, wartime gossip was exchanged and 'whip-arounds' were held in the Mess for special occasions such a worker's wedding, or to assist a worker who had lost a family member due to the war.

The SAA Mess Building primarily serviced the northern component of the RMW complex. It provided messing facilities for the workers employed at the main SAA Case and Assembly Shop, as well as the smaller Lead Press Building, Sawdust Preparation Building, the Chronograph House, the Main store and the Magazine Area.

Post war, the SAA Mess building remained a Commonwealth Government Property until 1951. On 21 March 1951, it was transferred to the Minister of Industries Assistance of the Queensland Government. This state government department had its name changed to Industrial Development of Queensland and so a new title was issued 16 May 1974. Government ownership (both Federal and State) of the property lasted 33 years and came to an end when this property was sold to Durex Pty Ltd on 22 January 1975. The building was leased Taura Pty Ltd in 1993. The current owners are Jeanette and Stanley Wayne Fowke.

The entire Rocklea Munitions Works site has been identified as being of local heritage significance in a number of publications. It was detailed in Peter Dunn's Australia@War website that was created in 1996. In 2000, it was mentioned in the book *A Closer Look at Salisbury and Nathan Heights*. It was also featured in the *Salisbury Heritage Trails – Residential and Industrial* in 2001. Of the over 80 buildings and other structures constructed for the Rocklea Munitions Works from 1941-43, only fourteen remain. These are mainly the larger buildings that were more easily adaptable for post war industrial usage. The SAA Mess Building is in situ and is important as one of the remaining buildings of the northern most munitions complex constructed in Australia during the Second World War.

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 remaining major buildings of the Rocklea Munitions Works, which was the most northerly Australian munitions factory built during World War II; and later, was to play a central part in Brisbane's post-war industrial development.

Rarity

CRITERION B

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

as the SAA Mess building for the only munitions complex built in Brisbane in World War II.

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 wartime Mess building that played an essential part in providing dining facilities and food disposal for the Rocklea Munitions Works.

Representative

CRITERION D

The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or classes of cultural places

as a large, purpose-designed and built World War II Mess building.

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 building designed by Brisbane architect Horace George Driver.

References

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2. Butlin & Schedvin, *War Economy 1942 – 1945*, p. 59
3. Butlin & Schedvin, *War Economy 1942 – 1945*, p. 399
4. Butlin & Schedvin, *War Economy 1942 – 1945*, p. 415
5. Edmonds, Leigh, 'Using new tools: some thoughts about the manufacture of aeroplanes in Australia during the second world war'. Australian war Memorial History Conference 9-13 July 1990
6. Roberts, Beryl, *A Brief History of Salisbury*, (Brisbane: Coopers Plain Ward Bicentennial History Committee, 1988), pp 16-17
7. Coopers Plains Local History Group, *A Closer Look at Salisbury and Nathan Heights*, p. 120
8. A & B Journal of Queensland, February 1941, April 1941, September 1941, October 1941
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10. Brisbane City Council Minutes, 1940-44, 1947-48
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13. Butlin S.J. & Schedvin C. B., *War Economy 1942-1945 – Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 4 (Civil), Volume IV*, (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1976)
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16. *Courier-Mail*, 15 March 1941, 31 March 1941, 21 April 1941
17. Department of Natural Resources, Queensland Certificates of title and other records.
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Part 1B

24. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 2; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 2
25. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 3; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 3
26. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J2682; W6186 to QS3128; Register of architectural plans and sketch plans, single number
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31. Ross, A. T. *Armed and ready: The industrial development and defence of Australia 1900-1945*. Sydney: Turnton & Armstrong, 1995
32. Watson, Donald & Judith McKay 1994, *Queensland Architects of the 19th Century*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia
33. <http://home.st.net.au/~dunn/ozatwar/ammofactory.htm>

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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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