

Rippon Lea House and Gardens

VICTORIA



Situated in the Melbourne suburb of Elsternwick, Rippon Lea House and Gardens extends over almost six hectares.

Rippon Lea is an outstanding example of a late 19th century 'Boom' style or 'Victorian Italianate' urban estate. It was constructed when there was considerable wealth in Victoria which led to the development of numerous ornate mansions.

In 1868 Frederick Thomas Sargood bought 27 hectares of scrub land at Elsternwick to establish his dream home and garden. He named the property after his mother, Emma Rippon, adding 'lea', an old English word for meadow.

In 1869 construction began on the two-storey, 15 room house. It was designed by Joseph Reed of Reed & Barnes, Melbourne's most important architect of the time. The house was built of polychrome brickwork, a new material in Australia when most of the important buildings were stone or rendered brick. Rippon Lea was among the finest polychrome buildings in Victoria.

Unusual design features of Rippon Lea include the outdoor pavilion or piazza adjacent to the dining room, two upstairs bathrooms, and the basement service rooms which were uncommon in 19th century Australia.

Sargood made substantial alterations and additions to Rippon Lea from 1882 until 1903, reflecting his increased wealth. Although he used different architects over the period, the style was unusually consistent.

Rippon Lea was sold by Sargood's widow after his death in 1903. The property passed into the hands of a succession of wealthy Melbourne families, whose alterations to the house and garden demonstrate the extravagant lifestyles of affluent society of the period.

Magnificent ornamental gardens surround the house, including shrubberies, a lake with a grotto, a bridge, boathouse, large fernery and a lookout mound with

a four-level tower. Hedges separate the ornamental gardens from extensive utilitarian areas, such as the kitchen garden, an orchard of historically significant fruit varieties and paddocks.

Sargood devised a sophisticated system for water self-sufficiency for the house and garden. An underground water collection, irrigation and drainage system, with water pumped by a windmill, ensured that the garden flourished. This system—one of the earliest, most complex and relatively intact examples of 19th century underground engineering irrigation to maintain a private garden—is now being reinstated at Rippon Lea.

Today Rippon Lea is in very good condition. The main part of the house is largely as it was in the 19th century, and adjoining it is the intact 1930s ballroom and pool complex. The dining room was redecorated in the 1930s and is intact from this period. Since 1972 the National Trust has reinstated the drawing room to its 1930s appearance, redecorated the nursery and a first floor bedroom, changed a bedroom into an art gallery and installed a new kitchen on the ground floor.

The estate has been open to the public for more than 30 years. It is a popular function venue and picnic spot, and offers a respected educational program for students.

National Heritage List: 11 August 2006

