

Rippon Lea



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Rippon Lea House and Gardens, Victoria

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

Rippon Lea is an outstanding late 19th century urban estate. It was constructed at a time when there was considerable wealth in Victoria which led to the development of numerous ornate mansions in Melbourne and in rural areas, known as 'Boom' style or 'Victorian Italianate'.

In 1868 Frederick Thomas Sargood bought 27 hectares of scrub land at Elsternwick on which 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, designed by Joseph Reed of Reed & Barnes, Melbourne's most important architect of the time. The house was made from polychrome brickwork, a new material in Australia where most of the important buildings were in stone or stuccoed brick. Rippon Lea was among the finest polychrome buildings in Victoria.

The ground floor consisted of the drawing and dining rooms, study and breakfast room. An unusual design feature was an outdoor pavilion or piazza adjacent to the dining room. On the first floor were six bedrooms, a dressing room, a nursery, an earth closet and, also remarkable for the time, two bathrooms.

In an adjacent single storey wing was a gun room, a maid's room and a day nursery for Sargood's 12 children. The service rooms were all in the basement, uncommon in 19th century Australia, and the area around these was excavated to provide natural light.

Sargood made substantial alterations and additions to Rippon Lea, reflecting his increased wealth, from 1882 until 1903. Although he used different architects over the 30 year period, the style used was unusually consistent.

Rippon Lea was sold by Sargood's widow after his death in 1903. The property then passed into the hands of a succession of wealthy Melbourne families,

who altered the house and garden in ways that demonstrate the extravagant lifestyles of wealthy society of the period.

Magnificent ornamental gardens surround the house with features including a large lawn, extensive shrubberies, flower gardens and a lake. Hedges separate the ornamental gardens from the more practical areas, which included a large attractive kitchen garden, an orchard of historically significant fruit varieties, farm paddocks and a stable complex.

Sargood was ahead of his time in devising 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 works to maintain a private garden – is now being reinstated at Rippon Lea.

Today Rippon Lea House is in a very good condition. The form of 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 over 30 years. It is a popular function venue and picnic spot, and offers a respected educational program for students.

