

# ROBUR TEA BUILDING



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1 robur tea building clarendon  
street south melbourne rear  
view dec1992

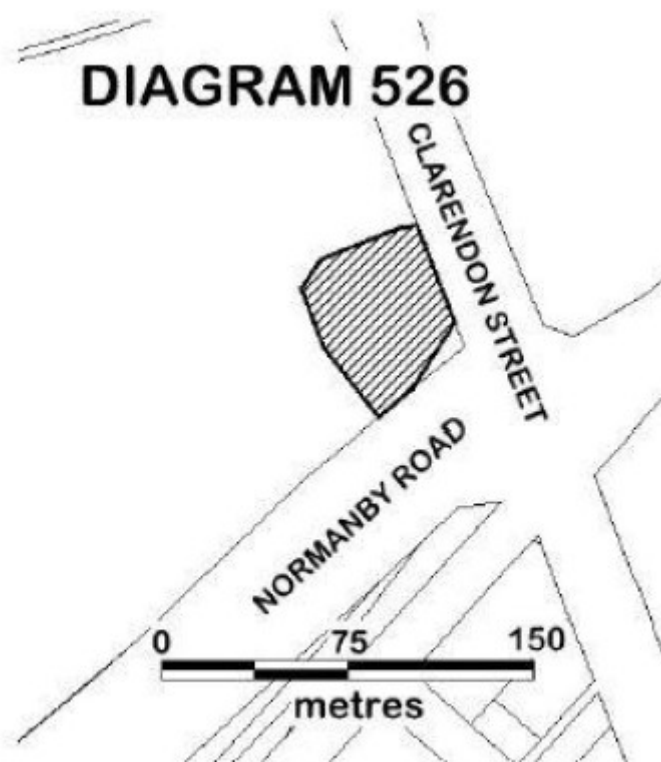


Diagram 526.JPG

## Location

28 CLARENDON STREET SOUTHBANK, MELBOURNE CITY

## Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H0526

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO765

## VHR Registration

May 5, 1982

## Amendment to Registration

September 6, 2018

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - September 28, 1999

### *What is significant?*

The Robur Tea Building is named after one of its better known occupants, but it was in fact built between 1887 and 1888 as a warehouse for Fergus and Mitchell, manufacturing stationers. The architect was Nahum Barnet, the engineer John Grainger and the builder James Moore. The building is constructed of load-bearing red brick and provides six above ground floors which are separated by cream brick courses. The largely unadorned walls are amply supplied with windows. The timber floors are supported by cast iron columns and steel beams. The building is a simple box shape with ornamentation confined to a rendered central entrance surround on the east facade which is reflected by an arched balcony the height of the top two floors.

### *How is it significant?*

The Robur Tea Building is of scientific (technical), architectural and historical significance to the State of Victoria.

### *Why is it significant?*

The Robur Tea Building is of scientific (technical) significance because of several innovative techniques employed in its construction. The most notable feature of the building is the solution to the problem of foundations. The building was erected on a swampy site and initial advice to the owners was that a building of the size proposed was not feasible. The engineer John Grainger was engaged and he devised a system of 450 ironbark piles and concrete rafts to support the six storey structure. It was a remarkable solution and no directly comparable buildings exist because such difficult foundations were not tackled again until after WWI. Another innovation was the use of steel beams supporting the floors, one of the earliest uses of such technology in Victoria. These innovations are a tribute to John Grainger, architect and engineer, who, in partnership with several reputed architects, contributed to such noted structures as Princes Bridge, the swing bridge over the La Trobe River at Sale, the administration block of the Melbourne Town Hall, Elizabeth House and Collins House and the conversion of Cliveden Mansions, East Melbourne.

The Robur Tea Building is of architectural significance as one of the finest and most prominent examples of a 19th century warehouse in Melbourne. It was for many years one of the tallest buildings outside the CBD, its height and freestanding character making it a South Melbourne landmark even today. The functional requirements of a warehouse are clearly evident in its simple box-like shape, but a certain amount of pride is expressed in the restrained decoration of the eastern facade.

The Robur Tea Building is of architectural significance as a noted work of Nahum Barnet. Barnet was a most prominent architect in the four decades that saw Melbourne emerge from the 1890s depression and flourish during the Edwardian period. Certain architectural details indicate that this building was seminal in Barnet's development as an architect. In particular the central arched motif links the six storeys of the facade, a detail that became a major element in his central city buildings. Buildings such as the Auditorium Building, Paton Building and the Davison Building at the corner of Collins Street and Elizabeth Street are typical of his city buildings. Barnet's practice was extensive, however, and included such buildings as the Villa Chandos in East Melbourne, the Florida Mansions in St Kilda and the Toorak Road Synagogue.

The Robur Tea Building is of historical significance as a reminder of the character and location of 19th century commerce in Melbourne. The Tea building is one of the few remaining traces of the industrial and warehousing establishments that until the 1970s and 1980s dominated the south bank of the Yarra, in an area where swampy land made substantial building difficult and residential development unattractive. These older uses have now been 'swamped' in their turn by leisure and luxury apartment developments. While the building has been known for some time as the Tea House, it is worth remembering that it was originally constructed as a stationer's warehouse and factory, and is now one of the few remaining factory buildings in the centre of the city. Its later use as a tea warehouse also serves as a reminder that this part of the river bank was once a thriving wharf area, before bigger ships and changed cargo handling methods led to the construction of larger capacity port facilities further towards the mouth of the Yarra.

## Permit Exemptions

### General Exemptions:

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

**Places of worship:** In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must [notify](#) the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

**Subdivision/consolidation:** Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

### Specific Exemptions:

The introduction of or alteration to office partitioning provided that such works are not attached to any original

fabric, except where the attachment occurs through structurally sound mortar joints.

Construction dates	1887,
Architect/Designer	Barnet, Nahum, Grainger, J,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place,
Other Names	ROBUR TEA HOUSE, THE TEA HOUSE, FERGUSSON AND MITCHELL FACTORY,
Hermes Number	1037
Property Number	

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## History

### Contextual History:History of Place:

The firm of printers and stationers, Fergusson and Mitchell, required new premises by the late 1880s. They acquired a site on the south bank of the Yarra next to Langland's Foundry and let a contract to construct a six storey building. It was soon discovered, however, that the site was directly over an old swamp, making construction of such an edifice extremely difficult. The company was told to abandon its plans, but, on the advice of Langland's Foundry, employed engineer John Grainger who devised a unique foundation system and successfully built the factory/warehouse.

The best comparison with this building is probably the Sands and McDougall building in Spencer Street, although it was much larger and its horizontal detailing divides the facades in a different way from the vertical treatment of the Robur Tea Building.

John Henry Grainger arrived in Australia in 1877. Soon after, at the age of 23, he was in partnership with Charles D'Ebro and they submitted the winning design of Princess Bridge. He also designed the swing bridge over the La Trobe River at Sale. He was appointed Government Architect at Perth but had to retire due to ill health. He joined another architectural partnership that became Grainger, Little and Barlow. The Administration Block of the Melbourne Town Hall, the State Savings Bank, Elizabeth House and Collins House were designed by them. Grainger was also involved with the conversion of Cliveden Mansions, East Melbourne. He died at his home in Kew aged 62 in 1917. The famous musician, Percy Grainger, was his son.

Associated People: Assoc.People JOHN HENRY GRAINGER (ENGINEER & FATHER OF PERCY)

## Extent of Registration

### NOTICE OF REGISTRATION

As Executive Director for the purpose of the **Heritage Act 2017**, I give notice under section 53 that the Victorian Heritage Register is amended by modifying a place in the Heritage Register:

Number: H0526

Category: Registered Place

Place: Robur Tea Building

Location: 28 Clarendon Street, Southbank

Municipality: Melbourne City

All of the place shown hatched on Diagram 526 encompassing all of Crown Allotment 2179, City of South Melbourne, Parish of Melbourne South.

Dated 6 September 2018

STEVEN AVERY  
Executive Director

[Victoria Government Gazette G 36 6 September 2018 1921]

*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*