

# WARRACKNABEAL TOWN HALL



14390 Warracknabeal Town Hall



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Warracknabeal Town Hall interior of auditorium 2009



Warracknabeal Town Hall plan

## Location

39 SCOTT STREET WARRACKNABEAL, YARRIAMBIACK SHIRE

## Municipality

YARRIAMBIACK SHIRE

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO69

## VHR Registration

December 3, 2009

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

### What is significant?

The Warracknabeal Town Hall, which includes the Regent Theatre, was built in 1939-40 to replace the existing municipal offices built in 1904 on a prominent site in the centre of town. Designed by the Melbourne architects Seabrook and Fildes, the building was constructed by builders A. A. Meyer and Sons to provide the town with a more adequate entertainment space. The building was designed to be used for various functions, including a range of municipal services. It included the council chamber. Like many town halls built after the First World War, that at Warracknabeal was fully fitted as a cinema, providing both a social focus for the town as well as a good source of income to pay for its construction.

The building, designed in the Moderne style, adopts an asymmetrical massing of forms which represent different functions. Horizontal and vertical elements are balanced within the composition, and cream brick, steel windows and other innovative materials are employed. The Scott Street elevation is largely symmetrical, except for a dominant vertical element at the corner of the site, which marks the entrance to the municipal offices and acts as a clock tower. This tower itself displays asymmetry with a panel of dark tiles contrasting with the cream brick, and the placement of a flagpole and clock. Entrances have thin concrete awnings, the hall entrance incorporating free-standing stylised concrete lettering with the words, Warracknabeal Town Hall. The hall entrance is between massive piers, with glazed advertising panels, and leads to pairs of glazed timber entrance doors. The setting of the building is complemented by six *Cupressus sempervirens* in Phillip Street, which appear to date from the construction of the building.

The interior of the hall is austere, with a stepped ceiling and flush mounted circular light fittings. Seats of cast iron, with velvet covering, and original carpet remain in the dress circle. The interior of the council chamber is substantially intact including a pendant light fitting, which comprises three white spheres joined by a sheet of plate glass rounded at each end. The first floor men's toilets retain the original Vitrolite glass urinals. Much of the late 1930s equipment survives in the bio box, including early RCA projection equipment and arc lighting, original RCA High Fidelity Sound Equipment (Model 703 Serial No 577), a electrical switchboard, a slide projector and a collection of 9 glass advertising slides. Rewinding equipment also survives in an adjacent space.

Architects Seabrooke and Fildes had gained notoriety with their design for MacPherson Robertson Girls High School, South Melbourne (VHR H1641) in 1933-34. In this innovative design they introduced European Modernism to Victoria, in particular the brick de-Stijl architecture of Dutch modernist Willem Dudok. Norman Seabrooke saw seminal buildings by Dudok in Hilversum, including the town hall (1927-31), while travelling in 1930. They continued to be influenced by this modern movement in their design of the Warracknabeal Town Hall in 1939-40.

### How is it significant?

The Warracknabeal Town Hall is of architectural and historical significance to the State of Victoria.

## How is it significant?

The Warracknabeal Town Hall is of historical significance as one of the most intact and fine examples of town halls built with a cinema. It demonstrates the combination of municipal and social needs of a rural community in a single facility.

The Warracknabeal Town Hall is of historical significance for its surviving, late 1930s projection and sound equipment, which may be the most intact example surviving in any rural Victorian cinema. The collection helps in understanding the operation of the cinema from its earliest period.

The Warracknabeal Town Hall is of architectural significance as an important example of the work of Seabrooke and Fildes, one of the most notable architectural practices of the period in Victoria. Together with other examples of their work, it represents a direct link with the European origins of Moderne architecture.

The Warracknabeal Town Hall is of architectural significance for its notable interior with surviving details and finishes, including furnishings of the dress circle, the use of Vitrolite in the men's toilets and the light fittings in the council chamber.

## 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:

General Conditions: 1. All exempted alterations are to be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place or object. General Conditions: 2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of works that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place or object are revealed which relate to the significance of the place or object, then the exemption covering such works shall cease and Heritage Victoria shall be notified as soon as possible. Note: All archaeological places have the potential to contain significant sub-surface artefacts and other remains. In most cases it will be necessary to obtain approval from the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria before the undertaking any works that have a significant sub-surface component. General Conditions: 3. If there is a conservation policy and plan endorsed by the Executive Director, all works shall be in accordance with it. Note: The existence of a Conservation Management Plan or a Heritage Action Plan endorsed by the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria provides guidance for the management of the heritage values associated with the site. It may not be necessary to

obtain a heritage permit for certain works specified in the management plan. General Conditions: 4. Nothing in this determination prevents the Executive Director from amending or rescinding all or any of the permit exemptions. General Conditions: 5. Nothing in this determination exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to seek relevant planning or building permits from the responsible authorities where applicable. Minor Works : Note: Any Minor Works that in the opinion of the Executive Director will not adversely affect the heritage significance of the place may be exempt from the permit requirements of the Heritage Act. A person proposing to undertake minor works may submit a proposal to the Executive Director. If the Executive Director is satisfied that the proposed works will not adversely affect the heritage values of the site, the applicant may be exempted from the requirement to obtain a heritage permit. If an applicant is uncertain whether a heritage permit is required, it is recommended that the permits co-ordinator be contacted.

#### **Exterior:**

Minor repairs and maintenance.

Removal of extraneous items such as air conditioners, pipe work, ducting, wiring, antennae, aerials etc, and making good.

Installation and repairing of damp proofing by either injection method or grout pocket method.

Installation or removal of external fixtures and fittings such as, hot water services and taps.

#### **Interior:**

Installation, removal or replacement of projection and sound equipment (excluding early or significant equipment), providing they do not adversely impact on significant elements, or involve structural alterations.

Painting of previously painted walls and ceilings in appropriate heritage colour schemes, provided that preparation or painting does not remove evidence of any original paint or other decorative scheme.

Installation, removal or replacement of carpets (excluding early carpet) and/or flexible floor coverings.

Installation, removal or replacement of screens or curtains, including cinema screens and curtains (and associated structure), curtain tracks, rods and blinds, other than where structural alterations are required.

Installation, removal or replacement of hooks, nails and other devices for the hanging of mirrors, paintings and other wall mounted art works.

Removal or replacement of non-original door and window furniture including, hinges, locks, knobsets and sash lifts.

Installation, removal or replacement of ducted, hydronic or concealed radiant type heating provided that the installation does not damage existing skirtings and architraves and that the central plant is concealed.

Installation, removal or replacement of electric clocks, public address systems, detectors, alarms, emergency lights, exit signs, luminaires and the like on plaster surfaces.

Installation, removal or replacement of bulk insulation in the roof space.

Installation of plant within the roof space, providing that it does not impact on the external appearance of the building or involve structural changes.

Installation of new fire hydrant services including sprinklers, fire doors and elements affixed to plaster surfaces.

Installation, removal or replacement of electrical wiring.

Installation, removal or replacement of fixed seating, other than early or original seating.

Construction dates	1939,
Architect/Designer	Seabrook & Fildes,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place,
Other Names	REGENT THEATRE,
Hermes Number	14390
Property Number	

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## **History**

(Adapted and expanded from National Trust File Note 7015)

In early 1938, the Warracknabeal Shire Council investigated replacing the existing municipal offices, located on

the prominent south-east corner of Scott Street and Phillips Street, Warracknabeal. The Shire of Borung Town Hall and Offices had been built in 1904. The needs of the ratepayers for a substantial hall available for dances, balls and suppers, and meetings were not felt to be accommodated by the existing hall. The estimated cost of the project at 18,000 pounds was however a concern, which was alleviated by the fact that the hall could be leased as a picture theatre on a regular basis, greatly alleviating the debt incurred. A vote at the June Council meeting approved the construction of the hall, sketch designs for which had already been prepared. (*Warracknabeal Herald*, 21 June 1938) The successful contractor was A. A. Meyer and Sons and Cr. Thomas R. Hewitt, the Shire President laid the foundation stone on 21st July 1939.

The design had been prepared by the leading Melbourne firm of architects, Seabrook and Fildes. Norman Seabrook completed his architecture course in 1930 and spent 18 months in England soon after, including time travelling on the Continent when he visited Holland. There he saw the *avant garde* work of Wilhelm M Dudok, architect for the City of Hilversum close to Amsterdam, and specifically the Vondelschool (1926) and the Hilversum Town Hall (1929) which were seminal buildings in the De Stijl movement, a major branch of Moderne architecture. On his return, at the depths of the Great Depression, Norman Seabrook taught at the Melbourne University architectural atelier. In 1933, he entered the competition for the design of a public girls' school sponsored by the very successful confectioner and philanthropist, Sir Macpherson Robertson and his wife. Seabrook's winning design for the MacRobertson Girls High School, which was described by Robin Boyd as the first truly Moderne example of architecture in Australia, was closely based on the Hilversum buildings. He soon employed and in 1936 took into partnership one of his best atelier students, Alan Fildes. The firm undertook many commissions in the 1930s, especially in Hamilton where it designed buildings for the young Reginald Ansett who was beginning to develop his transport empire, including his bus depot at 220 Gray Street. They continued to work across Australia for Ansett until a bitter falling out over fees between Reg Ansett and Norman Seabrook in the 1950s. The firm was one of the most notable Modernist architectural practices of the period in Australia. (Boyd, 1952, p. 84)

Many town halls were built in the 1920s and 1930s (and even as late as 1960) with sophisticated cinema facilities. These included most notably the Swan Hill Town Hall, known as the Britannia (1934), the Horsham Town Hall (c.1938) and the Casterton Town Hall (1937). The architects responsible were A. C. Leith and Associates who worked in association with Bartlett, Peck and Kemter on the Heidelberg Town Hall (1937), perhaps the closest comparative example to the Warracknabeal Town Hall. Other comparable Modernist buildings, although not cinemas, are the Signs Publishing Company and the Sanatorium Health Food Factory (1936-9), both by Edward F. Billson and both in Warburton. Other works by Seabrook and Fildes include several hotels and commercial premises in Gray Street, Hamilton (especially Scullions Department Store at 196 Gray Street which has probably the first example of plate glass buttressed windows in Australia), several fire stations (Seabrook's father was the Chief Commissioner of the Fire Brigade), the Stoke and Sons Factory, Brunswick and some domestic work including Seabrook's own home in Hawthorn, the home of Jimmy Andrew, an employee of Reg Ansett, at 355 Gray Street, Hamilton and another later house at 13 Carmichael Street, Hamilton. (City of Hamilton Conservation Study, Vols. 1 & 2) It is not known how Seabrook and Fildes came to be commissioned for the Warracknabeal Town Hall.

Local lore has it that the Town Hall was only built on the proviso that the operator of the town's major picture theatre, the Dal Monte, would relocate his operation to the Town Hall, which indeed occurred. (Brian Miller, 'Cinemas of Warracknabeal', *The Warracknabeal Plough*, 1995) There may however have been an expectation that another operator would emerge, since the town's second theatre, the Melba, had burned down in April 1938. But within ten years only the Regent Theatre is listed in Warracknabeal as part of the Regent Theatre chain of nine cinemas in rural Victoria, linked with the national distributor, Hoyts Theatres Pty Ltd based in Sydney. (Sands and MacDougall Directory, 1949, p. 2686) The Dal Monte Theatre, built in a modified version of the Classical Revival style, survives as a retail outlet.

The Town Hall was completed in early 1940. The Regent Theatre had its Gala Opening on Friday, 12th January of that year, with a program featuring MGM's *The Sweethearts*, starring Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald. (Copy of opening program, National Trust File) The hall hosted an Opening Ball on 23rd April. (Copy of serviette, National Trust File) In 1947, a new lessee renamed the cinema 'The Warrack', and operated into the 1950s and, in the 1980s, it was known as the Civic Cinema. Throughout its life, it has been a major focus for community gatherings, such as balls, presentations, parties, local theatre, community group meetings and social events. By the late 1940s, when the cinema was operated by O'Halloran Theatres, its registered capacity was 800 persons. (*Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory*, various years)

With the amalgamation of Councils in the 1990s, the new Shire of Yarriambiack established office elsewhere and the hall, already lacking maintenance for some years, faced declining usage and fell into further disrepair. In 1998, the fate and condition of the hall were debated in the community, with the possibility of closure and perhaps demolition being raised. In 1999, after an outcry from the community, a committee of management was formed to operate and promote the hall, and a commitment made to its retention.

## Plaque Citation

Built in 1939-40 to replace the existing municipal offices, this Moderne style, municipal building was designed by Seabrook and Fildes. Designed for a variety of functions, it included a fully fitted cinema, the Regent Theatre.

## Assessment Against Criteria

a. Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history

The Warracknabeal Town Hall is an intact and fine example of a building combining the municipal and social requirements of a rural community.

b. Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history.

The Warracknabeal Town Hall retains early projection and sound equipment, which may be the most intact collection surviving in any rural Victorian cinema.

c. Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Victoria's cultural history.

d. Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places or environments.

The Warracknabeal Town Hall is an important example of the work of Seabrooke and Fildes, one of the most notable architectural practices of the period in Victoria, working in the Moderne style.

e. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.

The Warracknabeal Town Hall retains original details and finishes, including furnishings of the dress circle, the use of Vitrolite in the men's toilets and the light fittings in the council chamber.

f. Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.

g. Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing and developing cultural traditions.

h. Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history.

## Extent of Registration

1. All of the building marked B1 on Diagram 2223 held by the Executive Director.

2. All of the land marked L1 on Diagram 2223 held by the Executive Director being all of the land described in Certificates of Title Volume 2309 Folios 694 and 695 and Volume 2331 Folio 013 and Volume 2625 Folio 867.

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*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/>*