

SAILORS' REST ELECTRIC SIGN



Sailors Rest Image CROP.jpg

Location

3 MOORABOOL STREET GEELONG, GREATER GEELONG CITY

Municipality

GREATER GEELONG CITY

Level of significance

Registered

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2338

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO221

VHR Registration

June 19, 2014

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - September 8, 2025

Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is located on Wadawurrung Country.

What is significant?

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign mounted on the parapet of the King Edward VII Sailors' Rest building in Geelong.

History Summary

The King Edward VII Sailors' Rest building was built in Geelong to a design by the Geelong architect, Percy Everett in 1912. The Sailors' Rest was an evangelical temperance organisation designed to provide welfare services to sailors; to attempt to divert them away from alcohol and other temptations of the town and to encourage them to return to or continue to practice Christianity. In order to attract more sailors to the 'Rest' an electric bulb sign was installed in 1926. The animated sign operated with flashing letters and words and was intended to be very noticeable from Yarra and Cunningham piers as the sailors disembarked. The sign was built by the nearby Melbourne Electric Supply Company and donated to the Sailors' Rest by Howard Hitchcock former mayor of Geelong and Chairman of the Sailors' Rest Committee. The sign is understood to have ceased operation from the 1950s until 1997 when it again operated but without animation.

Description Summary

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign consists of galvanised steel trough letters containing light bulbs spelling "SAILORS' REST." The bulbs are held by porcelain, Edison Screw lamp holders held in a galvanised steel plate fitted to the interior of each letter. The letters are held in a rectangular galvanised pipe frame with four diagonal bracing arms travelling from the top back of the frame to the roof of the King Edward VII Sailors' Rest building. All these sign components except the bulbs and lamp holders are painted dark green. The original steel conduit containing twelve original wires runs from a downward facing bell-mouth fitting on the wall next to the sign, to just above the floor of the hexagonal domed room nearby, where there is a galvanised steel plate tacked to the floor. The original electromechanical drum controller (now lost) rested on this plate. The original single earth wire runs from the sign frame to the conduit. The surviving original wiring consists of tinned copper wires covered with waxed cotton and insulated with vulcanized rubber.

This site is part of the traditional land of the Wadawurrung people.

How is it significant?

The Sailors' Rest Electrical Sign is of historical and social significance to the State of Victoria. It satisfies the following criterion for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

Criterion A Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's Cultural History

Criterion B Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history

Criterion 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.

Why is it significant?

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is significant at the State level for the following reasons:

[Criterion A]

[Criterion B]

[Criterion G]

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is historically significant for its use in the advertising and promotion of welfare services, the Temperance Movement and Christianity to sailors. It demonstrates the zeal and commitment of the Temperance Movement, which led to many changes in Australian society. It is historically significant for its landmark quality from the waterfront and wharves, and has been appreciated by visitors to the waterfront for nearly ninety years.

(Criterion A)

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is historically significant as a rare surviving original electric bulb sign in Victoria. Bulb signs were the first type of electric signage, preceding neon signage.

(Criterion B)

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is socially significant for its association with the long-standing and continuing relationship with seafarers visiting Victorian ports from the 1850s to today. It is tangible evidence of a charitable Christian organisation valued by thousands of sailors past and present.

(Criterion G)

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is also significant for the following reasons, but not at the State level:

It is one of very few surviving historic electric signs in Geelong.

It is associated with a former mayor of Geelong, Howard Hitchcock.

It is a well known and visible landmark in Geelong.

It is associated with the Geelong branch of the Melbourne Electric Supply Company which made the sign and supplied electricity for it.

(Criterion G)

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:

PERMIT EXEMPTIONS

General Condition: 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 Condition: 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.

General Condition: 3.

All works should be informed by Conservation Management Plans prepared for the object. The Executive Director is not bound by any Conservation Management Plan, and permits still must be obtained for works suggested in any Conservation 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 Condition: 5.

Nothing in this determination exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to seek relevant planning or building permits from the relevant responsible authority, where applicable.

Specific Exemptions:

Works and alterations to the following are permit exempt:

Replacement of bulbs with Edison Screw 40W warm white LED bulbs Rewiring providing no new holes are drilled into the metal of the lettering and no original conduit or wire (pre 1996) is removed Touching up and painting the metal trough letters black or other dark colour following conservation treatment which has resulted in a stable metal surfaceReplacing non-functioning unglazed porcelain Edison Screw lamp holders with new unglazed porcelain Edison Screw lamp holders

Theme

3. Connecting Victorians by transport and communications 8. Building community life

Construction dates 1911,

Architect/Designer Everett, Percy,

Heritage Act Categories Registered object,

Other Names SAILOR'S REST, SAILORS REST, MISSION TO SEAFARERS,

Hermes Number 4953

Property Number

History

HISTORY

History of the Sailors' Rest building in Geelong

The Sailors' Rest mission has operated in Geelong for many years. The Port of Geelong was very busy in the 1880s and 1900s with large amounts of agricultural produce such as wheat and wool being exported and timber and other exotic items being imported. The Geelong Historical Society notes that various groups in Geelong recognised that there was a need for support for the sailors from all visiting ships.

In February 1895 following the death of a sailor in gaol in January, the *Geelong Advertiser* announced the opening of a Sailors' Rest in the Bethel (non-conformist chapel) in Corio Street. Activities for sailors were

organised by the YMCA, Baptist and Methodist churches and private individuals, first at the Corio Street Bethel Chapel and then at 51 Moorabool Street. Mr H.R. Reid who was associated with the Melbourne Mission to Seamen (established 1858) was invited to speak at a meeting at the Chamber of Commerce in 1900 and after outlining how the Melbourne Mission worked, said that it:

...showed Jack that there was entertainment for him without resorting to drink, and that he could be of far better service to his master.

The meeting formed a superintending committee for a Geelong Sailors' Rest, and from 1910 began agitating for its own premises. Their efforts were successful and on 3rd February 1912, the Premier of Victoria, the Hon. John Murray, MLA laid the foundation stone of the 'King Edward VII Sailors' Rest' building on the corner of Moorabool Street and Victoria Parade, Geelong. The two storey brick and cement rendered Edwardian period structure was designed by architects Seeley, King and Everett, the design being attributed to Percy Everett.

Soon after its establishment, the Geelong King Edward VII Sailors' Rest joined the British and Foreign Sailors' Society which was an interdenominational Protestant group; now known as the Sailors' Society. There were a number of Christian evangelical, temperance charities ministering to seafarers at the same time.

The Temperance Movement began in Australia in the 1830s and was most active from the mid Victorian period until the start of WWII. The movement in Australia was part of a mass movement in English speaking countries led by Protestant religious groups. It was promoted by a number of groups such as the Salvation Army, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and The Independent Order of Rechabites, all of which still have an anti-alcohol mission today. The Temperance Movement was a major driver for the development of Sailors' Rests and other missions to seafarers. The stereotype of the 'drunken sailor' was based in fact with many sailors drinking heavily and getting into trouble while on shore. Sailors are documented to have signed the Temperance Pledge and returned to or converted to Christianity at the UK Sailors' Rests, and it is likely that similar events occurred at the equivalent Australian organisations.

The Geelong Sailors' Rest continues to provide support to seafarers today and is now known as the Mission to Seafarers. It is part of the international Anglican mission organisation of the same name. It continues to be supported by a number of Geelong's Anglican parishes. As has always been the practice in other Missions to Seafarers in Victoria, alcohol is not served. The King Edward VII Sailors' Rest building was sold in 1989 and is now a licensed cafe called "Sailors' Rest". The Mission to Seafarers now operates from a building at North Shore, Geelong.

Other Missions to seafarers were established in Melbourne, Port Melbourne, Williamstown, Portland and Hastings. Those in Melbourne, Portland and Hastings continue today. The Melbourne Mission to Seafarers is the only one to still operate from its original building.

History of the Sailors' Rest sign

Early committees of the Sailors' Rest made a variety of attempts to advertise the location of the building and attract sailors to it. Agnes Weston founder of the UK Sailors' Rest organisation, aimed to create '...a (bright and inviting) public house without the drink, close to the Dockyard,' and it seems that the Geelong Sailors' Rest group had the same aims. In 1926 the annual report of the Geelong Sailors' Rest noted that:

...it is useless to ask the men to keep away from the danger of the Hotel if we do not provide some counter attraction...

Entertainments for sailors at this time included non-alcoholic refreshments, music and games such bagatelle, billiards and quoits on the roof. These games were followed by a prayer service. It seems that the Sailors' Rest had to compete strenuously with Geelong's hotels to attract sailors and that the Sailors' Rest Executive Committee saw an electric sign as important to that competition. In the 1930s, the Executive Committee erected a painted sign in town, also to direct sailors to the Rest.

The 1916 minutes of the Sailors' Rest Executive Committee noted that they wished to put a sign on the Sailors' Rest building. The size and prominence of the sign seems to have been intended to ensure that sailors could easily identify the site:

The question of a prominent sign Sailors' Rest on the building to be seen from Yarra Street was left with Captain Molland, Mr Gowty and the Hon. Seely for consideration and recommendation.

In 1920 in a meeting chaired by Ald. Howard Hitchcock, who was chair of the Executive Committee and the Mayor of the City of Geelong, it was noted that:

it would be an excellent idea if we could have a big electric sign placed on top of the building stating what building it was. Then the sailors entering ... would see where his shore home was long ... he reached the wharf. In responding the Mayor said it was an excellent idea to have an electric sign that if the executive committee would give the necessary permission and have the sign erected he would be only too pleased to defray the cost.

During 1926 the Committee was reporting slow progress on the manufacture of the sign:

In referring to the electric sign on the roof the Mayor regretted the delay in the erection but said it was unavoidable. He suggested that the sign be alternating and said it would be attended to.

The word 'alternating' may indicate that the lamps were intended to cycle 'on' and 'off' in some way.

The sign was finally erected on 13 December 1926 and reported in the *Geelong Advertiser* the next day.

A very interesting function took place last evening at King Edward VII Sailors' Rest. Members of the Executive met officially to take possession of an electric sign recently erected on the roof of the Rest by the Melbourne Electric Supply company. The sign will flash out across the harbour the words "Sailors' Rest" directing sailors to this popular haven. A welcome awaits them by a group of honorary workers who provide comfort to the men of the marine. The turning on of the sign current took place at 8pm by representatives of the Electric supply company.

Operation of the sign

The sign is almost certain to have been a type known as 'animated' where lights flashing on and off give the impression of movement and make the sign more noticeable. The *Geelong Advertiser* of 14 December 1926 described how the sign operated:

The apparatus connected with the light is of a drum controlled type, electrically operated, controlling eleven complete currents each current being independently fused with four distinct on and off positions.

A drum controller or drum sequencer is a reprogrammable electromechanical timing device used to activate electric switches in repetitive sequences; in this case it is assumed to have switched different bulbs and groups of bulbs on and off. As the drum revolved - driven by a small electric motor - 'cams' or pegs set into the edge of the drum would have successively 'closed' and 'opened' switches controlling the eleven lamp circuits. These devices were not available ready made in the 1920s and it is likely that it was fabricated in the Melbourne Electric Supply company (MESCo) workshops.

There are eleven letters in the sign and the presence of the eleven complete currents in the original operation indicates that each letter could have been lit one by one. The apostrophe would presumably have lit with its adjoining 'S.' "Four distinct on and off positions" would have allowed four different types of animations to flash on and off. Each word could have illuminated individually and both words could have flashed on and off either separately or together.

The sign may have been expensive to operate as the Executive Committee minutes of 10 March 1927 record:

It was decided to have the illuminated sign switched on at the following times 7pm to 7.30pm. 8pm to 8.15. 8.45 till 9pm, till 1st May, when vessels are in port; and to be switched on only by Caretaker.

An indicative estimate of the costs of operating the sign was developed by an electrical engineer, Miles Pierce of Engineering Heritage Victoria. Using contemporary electricity costs and calculations based on the number of bulbs and their wattage, he has estimated that in the 1920s it would have cost approximately £140 per annum to operate the sign. In 1926, the whole annual expenditure of the Sailors' Rest was £603, with only £14 per annum spent on fuel and lighting (the sign was installed in December 1926). This indicates that the sign was an expensive addition to the budget of the Sailors' Rest organisation.

Electric signs were designed to be seen by day and night. Sign makers developed a mathematical formula to calculate visibility of 'exposed incandescent filament lamp signs' based on the height of the letters. Miles Pierce has used this formula to determine that legibility of the lit letters of the Sailor's Rest sign at night would be good to approximately the middle of the Cunningham and former Yarra Street piers. Beyond that distance legibility would

be reduced but with the sign still likely to be readable, or at least able to attract attention to itself, for much of the length of the two piers where ships would be berthed. This is confirmed by the *Geelong Advertiser* of 14 December 1926 describing the launch of the sign:

Following this ceremony members present inspected the sign from the wharves and it was announced a great success.

The *Geelong Advertiser* in 1997 noted that the sign had been dark for approximately 40 years (presumably since the 1950s). This may have been due to high operating costs or to a failure in some part of the system (e.g. wiring or the drum controller) in the 1950s that was not then repaired or replaced.

History of illuminated signage in Victoria

Signage in the urban areas in Victoria appeared in the following order with many sign types being used concurrently. Exact dates are not known as there is little documentary information and few photographs of historic signs at night.

- . ca. 1840s - Painted signs - only visible in the day time
- . Late 1890s - Temporary electric incandescent decorations
- . ca. 1920s - Permanent electric incandescent bulb signs (oil and gas lights seem to have only been used as street illumination, not as part of signs)
- . ca. 1930s - Neon signs and neon / bulb combination signs
- . ca. 1950s - Back lit acrylic signs - now the most common

Commercial premises have a long tradition of advertising using painted signs. Once synthetic pigments became available during the industrial revolution, the colours became brighter and gilding and silvering was used to give added emphasis to the lettering. Signs were mounted on the facades of buildings and sometimes covered most of the surface of a building. Signs could be classified as 'heraldic' signs which are meant to get the customer's attention; and 'informational' signs which provide supporting information such as cost or opening hours. Heraldic signs projecting above the top of the building are known as 'sky signs.'

Incandescent signage

The first electric power stations were constructed in Victoria in the 1880s and the Melbourne CBD was lit with electric light from 1894. Gas street lighting was replaced by carbon arc lamps in the major streets and incandescent lamps in minor streets and laneways.

Incandescent bulbs using carbon filaments were patented by Thomas Edison and others from 1879. These improved somewhat in performance over time but were replaced by more reliable tungsten filament electric bulbs which were patented by the Tungsram Company in Hungary in 1904. Incandescent bulbs were mostly used inside. The first frosted incandescent bulbs were produced in 1925 but were probably not available in Australia until the 1930s and are unlikely to have been used for the sign originally.

Images from the 1880s show festoons of electric bulbs illuminating buildings on special occasions, for example, public buildings and the streets of Melbourne were lit from dawn to dusk to mark the Queen's Jubilee in 1887. A photograph shows Flinders Street Station building decorated with incandescent bulbs for the 1901 visit of Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York. This illumination was designed by James Fawcett, the architect of Flinders Street Station. It appears that the skills to design and install temporary bulb illuminations were well developed in Victoria in the late nineteenth century.

The first permanent electric sign in the USA was erected in Chicago in 1893 and the technology to create permanent signage is likely to have appeared in Victoria soon after. A photograph from 1901 shows a possibly temporary sign on the Princess Theatre (VHR H0093). Bulbs decorate the entrance to Luna Park (VHR H0938) and appear in photos dating from its construction in 1912. However permits for the first electric signs in Geelong were not lodged and approved until 1925. Theatre canopies are still often outlined in flashing incandescent bulbs such as the canopy of the Astor Theatre (VHR H1751).

Neon signage

The first neon sign was installed in Paris in 1912 and the patent for neon light arrived in Australia in 1924. It is not known when the first neon sign was installed in Victoria. An early one was the MacRobertson's sign (now demolished), which was installed on the top of the company's Old Gold Building in 1921 as a bulb sign with neon added later. Permits were granted for the first neon signs in Geelong in 1930 although it would appear that floodlighting commercial buildings and their painted signs was more common until at least the c.1940s. In some cases combination bulb and neon lighting was used. This would be to take advantage of the instantaneous nature of incandescent lights which can be switched on and off more rapidly than neon.

Electric neon signs were controversial. In 1960 the Architect Robin Boyd deplored excesses of commercialism typified by the Oakleigh Motel's signage in his book *The Australian Ugliness*:

Lettering and illustrations, crying for attention to the wares of each little shop, grew from fairly discrete signwriting to huge placards and cut-outs ... Australians grew after the middle of the twentieth century into the most vigorous and undisciplined advertisers in the world.

However, many Victorians remember electric signs such as the now demolished Allen's Sweets bulb and neon sign in Southbank (1969) with great fondness. Children in particular enjoyed electric signs, with Dame Phyllis Frost recalling:

At the age of three (in ca. 1920) I spelled my first word of five letters, Aspro. That was because there was a big electrical sign that winked on and off on the south bank of the Yarra spelling out A-S-P-R-O, ASPRO, day and night. Beside it was a bear, also in lights, licking a Sennitts ice-cream. We loved those electric signs. As a small child I became ecstatic when I first saw the Skipping Girl Vinegar animated sign in Abbotsford. It was fascinating and we watched it every time we passed.

Town planners began to oppose flashing bulb and neon signs as being too distracting to traffic and for aesthetic reasons; although a 1975 survey by the outdoor Advertising Association of Australia found that most people felt that illuminated signs contributed to the character of the city. Some inner city electric signs became more acceptable from the 1980s for sentimental reasons and due to movements such as pop art and post-modernism.

KEY REFERENCES USED TO PREPARE ASSESSMENT

Grateful acknowledgement is given for considerable assistance from:

- . Miles Pierce and Owen Peake, electrical engineers from Engineering Heritage Victoria whose enormous expertise in the history of electrical technology and its use in Victoria was invaluable in identifying the operation and components of the sign.
- . Kevin Krastins, Heritage Planner, City of Greater Geelong, whose report and initial research in the Geelong Advertiser and other sources informed this assessment.
- . David Rowe, Heritage Advisor, City of Greater Geelong for many useful comments and contacts.
- . Father Noah Park and the volunteers at the Geelong Mission to Seafarers for access to the minutes and annual reports of the Sailors' Rest Society.
- . Janine Flew, Australian National Maritime Museum for assistance with images.

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Anon., *Minutes of the Executive Committee, King Edward VII Sailors' Rest Geelong*, Unpublished. 1926-1927 and 1936

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Wikipedia entry, *Drum Sequencer*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drum_sequencer (accessed 21 February 2014)

Plaque Citation

The 1926 Sailors' Rest Electric Sign, a rare surviving electric bulb sign from the era, was designed to attract sailors to this Christian temperance mission and divert them away from alcohol and other temptations in town.

Assessment Against Criteria

Criterion

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is significant at the State level for the following reasons:

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is historically significant for its use in the advertising and promotion of welfare services, the Temperance Movement and Christianity to sailors. It demonstrates the zeal and commitment of the Temperance Movement, which led to many changes in Australian society. It is historically significant for its landmark quality from the waterfront and wharves, and has been appreciated by visitors to the waterfront for nearly ninety years. [

Criterion A]

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is historically significant as a rare surviving original electric bulb sign in Victoria. Bulb signs were the first type of electric signage, preceding neon signage. [

Criterion B]

The Sailors' Rest Electric Sign is socially significant for its association with the long-standing and continuing relationship with seafarers visiting Victorian ports from the 1850s to today. It is tangible evidence of a charitable Christian organisation valued by thousands of sailors past and present. [

Criterion G]

Extent of Registration

NOTICE OF REGISTRATION

As Executive Director for the purpose of the **Heritage Act 1995**, I give notice under section 46 that the Victorian Heritage Register is amended by including Heritage Register Number H2338 in the category described as Heritage Object.

Sailors' Rest Electric Sign
3 Moorabool Street
Geelong
Greater Geelong City

The extent of registration on the Victorian Heritage Register affects the whole object known as the Sailors' Rest Electric sign.

The object comprises the following components:

- * The letters reading 'Sailors' Rest' and their frame
- * Four diagonal bracing arms from the back of the sign frame onto the roof
- * Original conduit with bell mouth travelling from the wall next to the sign to the floor of the hexagonal domed room
- * Original earth wire from sign to conduit

* Plate on the floor of the hexagonal domed room where the original Electric controller (now lost) rested.

Dated 19 June 2014 TIM SMITH
Executive Director

[*Victoria Government Gazette* G 25 19 June 2014 p.1265]

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/>