CASSELDON PLACE HERITAGE PRECINCT
A Proposal by Melbourne Heritage Action
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Introduction

The collection of buildings and laneway remnants on the corner of Spring Street and Little Lonsdale Street is the largest intact portion of Melbourne’s notorious 19th century red-light district, an area of substandard housing and poverty, as well as numerous brothels, hotels and workshops.

The character of the area and its notoriety is clearly documented by the numerous news stories from the 1850s to the 1920s that can be specifically located to the buildings and lanes in this precinct. For instance Casselden Place was known in the 1890s as a place of substandard housing, and in the 1910s as ‘that notoriously unsavoury thoroughfare’, with many ‘houses of assignation’, of which one remains. The Mission building represents two aspects of this history, being originally an 1872 ‘dance school’ that was ‘well known to the police’, later transformed into the Anglican Mission to the Streets and Lanes, with a specific mission to rescue ‘fallen women’.

It includes five buildings currently individually listed for their architectural or historic significance, along with three unprotected early 20th century workshop buildings, and the stub ends of four laneways separating them.

There are buildings dating from the 1850s to the 1920s, the earliest buildings demonstrating the character of the notorious ‘Little Lon’ precinct of the mid to late 19th century. The light industrial buildings which replaced some of the housing in the early 20th century demonstrate the partial transformation of the area, but it still housed many poor and marginalised, and was the subject of sensationalist news stories into the 1930s.

It is an area which has been virtually frozen in time since the whole block was compulsorily acquired by the Commonwealth in 1948. In fact there are no buildings later than 1925, and none of the buildings have been substantially externally altered, which alone makes it worth considering as a heritage precinct.

The creation of a heritage precinct would mean that not only all the buildings and laneways should be generally retained, but opens the possibility for more detailed interpretation, bringing the area’s history to life.

This is part of Melbourne whose history should be conserved and celebrated as a whole, not treated as a scattering of individual buildings that may (or may not) be retained in the same way other heritage places are treated.
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

What is significant?

The precinct consists of a streetscape of low mostly red brick buildings comprising a city corner and short streetscape, the stubs of three bluestone laneways, and a cottage facing one of the lanes. The laneways were all created by 1855, but were not named, simply known as ‘off Little Lonsdale Street’, until the 1880s.

The buildings in the precinct were all constructed between the early 1850s and the 1920s, and there are no modern intrusions. They include two hotels, the one surviving ‘Little Lon’ laneway house and a portion of the laneway itself, two other laneway stubs, an ‘dance hall’ which became a religious Mission, and light industrial buildings from the 1880s and early 20th centuries. None of the buildings has been extensively altered externally, except the rear of the Oddfellows Hotel.

The buildings are, in order of construction:

- Oddfellows Hotel (1853, with the earliest part 1848), one of the oldest hotel buildings in the CBD, delicensed in 1912 and then converted to a Chinese furniture workshop
- Anglican Mission to the Streets and Lanes, constructed in 1913 around an 1872 ‘dance hall’
- 17 Casselden Place, a small brick cottage of three rooms built 1877, occupied by a variety of tenants.
- Porta & Sons bellows makers at 25 Little Lonsdale, built 1883, with a rear Edwardian addition, later occupied by Chinese workshops
- A pair of c1920 workshops at 27-29 Little Lonsdale, later occupied by Gloria Knitting Mills
- Robertson and Buckley Garage built 1921 which wraps around the Elms Family Hotel
- Elms Family Hotel of 1925 on the corner, replacing the 1850s Old Governor Bourke Hotel, and operated as a typical pub until 2016
- W H Blakeley Engineering at 13-21 Little Lonsdale, built 1925 and long occupied by that firm.
- the stubs of Griffin Lane, Casselden Place, Gorman Alley, and Leichhardt Street.
- the site of 15 Casselden Place, marked out in bricks in the paving.

The precinct was first developed in the 1850s as an area of low cost housing dotted with numerous pubs. Located at the eastern end of Little Lonsdale Street, it soon became part of a notorious ‘slum’ and red-light district, known as “Little Lon” by the early 20th century. This block was considered the heart of the district, and was subdivided by numerous lanes and lanes-off-lanes, lined with poorly built, cheap, often run-down housing, rented by poor families, ‘single women’, some openly operating as brothels, recent migrants such as Syrians, ‘Hindoos’. Chinese migrants later became a significant presence, operating mainly furniture workshops from the later 19th century into the 1920s, when ‘Chinatown’ was at its most extensive.

By the 1880s, moves were made to start to clean up the area, and light industrial buildings began to replace the housing. More concerted effort in the 1900s saw many pubs de-licensed,
such as Oddfellows, and by the 1920s more of the housing had been replaced by light industrial structures, but the area still housed low income residents in small laneway houses right up until about 1950.

The whole block was compulsorily acquired by the Commonwealth in 1948, who went on to clear much of the middle of the blocks, and construct the Commonwealth Offices on the north side of Little Lonsdale Street, leaving the southern block frozen in time, until parts were finally re-developed in the late 1980s. Extensive archaeological digs were conducted on what had become carparking in the 1980s, and again in the early 2000s before the construction of the 50 Lonsdale. This clutch of buildings however remained untouched until 2006, when 50 Lonsdale Street was built, the buildings on that site renovated, paving laid around them, and the Oddfellows refurbished to again become a pub. The Mission became an informal Orthodox worship space, while the Elms Family Hotel remained an ordinary pub, operated by three generations of the women of the Tierney family for 35 years, until it was closed in 2016.

**How is it significant?**

The Casselden Place precinct is significant to the City of Melbourne at the local level.

**Why is it significant?**

The Casselden Place precinct is historically significant as the largest remaining intact portion of what was once considered the centre of the notorious “Little Lon” precinct. This city block was occupied by often substandard housing off narrow lanes, numerous pubs, workshops, and a large number of brothels. Some of the buildings had many uses, with direct connections to the long history of occupation by the marginal and disadvantaged. The cottage at 17 Casselden Place itself would most likely have been rented at various times by both Chinese and ‘single women’, the Oddfellows Hotel building included a separate house, doubtless also variously occupied, The “Mission to the Streets and Lanes” building of 1913 on Spring Street served to assist the poor of the area, while the hall within (originally a notorious 1870s ‘dance school’) was used by the various religions represented in the area. The later Chinese occupation of the area is also well represented, with the 1880s factory at 25 Little Lonsdale occupied in the early 20th century by Chinese businesses, and the whole of Oddfellows Hotel became a Chinese cabinet making workshop after it was de-licensed in 1912.

The collection of buildings has remained unchanged since the 1920s, retaining a range of buildings illustrating all periods of the Little Lon area up to that date. It includes one of the oldest hotel buildings in Melbourne, a 1920s pub (the only one in the block not closed in the 1900s which remained in operation until 2016), the last remaining laneway house, and a series of light industrial buildings from the 1880s to the 1920s, subdivided by narrow laneways, creating a streetscape unique in the CBD.
PRECINCT BOUNDARIES

HO 707 - Oddfellows Hotel
HO 1058 – 1880s workshop
HO 1078 - Elms Family Hotel
HO741 – Anglican Mission (note not outlined correctly)
HO555 – Cottage, 17 Casselden Place

Mahlstedt Map 1925.
PHOTOGRAPHS

Oddfellows Hotel, 1853

Oddfellows, original house section c1848

Streetscape looking east

Edwardian warehouse

17 Casselden Place and laneway

Porta Bellows works

Outline of 15 Casselden Place

Blakeley side wall to Casselden Place
RESEARCH

1891 - Casselden Place living conditions from the *Encyclopaedia of Melbourne*:

The conditions in Casselden Place were described in a report by the Assistant Inspector of Nuisances, Edward Thunderbolt, in 1891.

“I visited the premises occupied by K Rahirnbux at 8 Casselden Street where I found two overflowing Privy Pans in a most filthy state yesterday 9th inst. I have cautioned the same man on the 3rd inst about the same class of nuisance then, when I informed Mr K Rahirnbux how to abate the nuisance and that he may be summoned if he did not abate the same on the 3rd inst I counted 33 men on the same premises and yesterday 29 men on the same premises all Indians.”

Sensational News stories:

1859 – ‘Seduction’ : the landlord of the Old Governor Bourke fathered a child after promise of marriage, not undertaken, damages 200 pounds.

1862 – ‘Robbery in Company’ - Ellen Copley met a sailor at Oddfellows, left with him, and later robbed him at another hotel nearby.

1887 – ‘Inquest on Thomas Elms’ - Brother of Elms Family Hotel licensee was living at the hotel, ‘a known inebriate’, was attacked one night in another lane, returned, and later died of his injuries.

1887 – ‘Fatal stabbing affray’ - during drunken brawl outside Oddfellows.

1903 – ‘A Terrible Outrage’ - 30 yo man living in Casselden Place very badly cut up with scissors by defacto wife.

1912 – ‘Little Lonsdale Street Ladies’ – licensee of Oddfellows Hotel charged with allowing ‘women of bad character’ be upon her premises.

1918 – ‘Slum Sirens : Trio of Tarts Trapped’ – three women at separate addresses, 8 and 13 Casselden Place (‘that notoriously unsavoury thoroughfare’) and one at Surrey Place, off Griffin Lane, were all charged with keeping a ‘place of assignation’.

1928 – ‘Woman Shot in Side : Incident in City Lane’ – a woman was found in Casselden Place shot by sailor, who then could not be found.
HISTORIC IMAGES

Little Lonsdale from Spring Street c1870

Casselden Place c1950

Gorman Alley c1950, showing rear of Casselden Place cottages

Aerial view c1957

East side of Casselden Place showing part of rear of W H Blakeley Engineering c1950

Porta Bellows as AMAL ELECTRIX, early 1980s