

HERITAGE PLACE

NAME OF PLACE: SKENE HOMESTEAD COMPLEX

ADDRESS/LOCATION OF PLACE: Skene Homestead Road STRATHKELLAR

STUDY NUMBER: 0345

HERITAGE OVERLAY NUMBER:

OTHER NAME/S OF PLACE: WARRUMBEECH, THE PLAINS

PRECINCT: outside

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA: Southern Grampians Shire

PARISH: PARISH OF KANAWALLA

ACCESS DESCRIPTION:

CFA 432C 27 & 28; VicRoads 73 C4; located at the end of Skene Homestead Road about 1.0km west of the Skene Woolshed road.

SIGNIFICANCE RATING: State



Skene Homestead, Skene Homestead Road, Strathkellar, 1923 façade

Image Date: 20/02/02

EXTENT OF LISTING:

To the extent of: 1. All the main house including the 1923 extension and all of its interiors, the stables and other outbuildings to the rear of the main house, the garden, the original house, the woolshed and its outbuildings, and two areas of 10,000 square metres sufficient to accommodate the main house complex and the woolshed complex.

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PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

The first house, which perhaps dates from the 1840s and is located to the north-west of the main house, is now much altered and has not been inspected. Parts of its garden may have been incorporated into the later homestead garden.

The second house is a two-storey building with a substantial and extensive sub-basement level and an extensive attic storey. It is built of bluestone, rock faced but also dressed as architraves and quoins. One distinctive feature is the change in the thickness of the bedding of the bluestone from large beds on the ground floor to small beds on the first floor. There is a simple but sophisticated solid parapet which hides the slate roof. The roof has an octagonal skylight over the hall and a lookout with diagonal timber balustrading. The front doorway is tripartite with a fanlight and is subdivided by stone piers. The door is seven panels. The ground floor windows were standard 12 paned double hung sashes, although a larger modern window, probably in the 1923 alterations has replaced one. There is a bay window on the north elevation, with a small gablet in its parapet, while all other windows are standard 12 paned double hung sashes. The first floor windows and the upper hall door of the facade are French doors. A billiard room, probably designed by J S Jenkins, was added in the 1880s over the basement. A historic photograph taken after the billiard room was added shows another lower single storey building behind and to one side at the rear. Originally the house had a two-storey timber verandah with posts treated as columns, a small breakfront (but no pediment) and diagonal balustrading. Only the upper storey had brackets and a small frieze. The northern end at least was glazed with solid panelling in lieu of the balustrade. The timber verandah and the rear building were demolished for the 1923 alterations and extensions.

The interiors of the main house remain substantially intact for their joinery and plasterwork. The winding staircase is of particular interest for its fine and skilful construction over four storeys. The plaster decoration of the hall ceiling is strongly Classical in its detailing. Also of note is the bay window of the northern room. The opposite room has been modified to link with the 1923 extension. Most of the original mantles, which are simple and typical of the period, survive. The upper floors have simpler detailing with some being modified to accommodate the 1923 alterations. One bedroom appears to have been used as a nursery. There are several small attic rooms, probably used as servants' bedrooms. The basement rooms are strictly utilitarian and include a full suite of service rooms, mostly lit by sub-floor windows. The billiard room, added in the 1880s above the basement and reached by a short flight of stairs from the back passage, retains its original wallpaper and billiard table.

The 1923 alterations and extensions were very substantial and included the new two storey reinforced concrete verandah across the original façade and a single storey verandah around the new hall, drawing room and dining room. The verandah incorporates a tower and pavilions at either end to emphasis the new entrance. The new hall and dining room are lined with stained panelling wainscoting to the height of the internal doors. The drawing room is finished with plaster. Fine leadlighting, typical of the period, is used in the front and internal doors. A shallow bay window in the drawing room extends into the front verandah and a deeper bay window in the dining room extends into the side verandah. Unusually, there is no access from the dining room to the verandah. Throughout the extension the ceilings are elaborate but typical fibrous plaster loosely in a neo-Adam style. Beyond the formal rooms there is an extensive range of service rooms on either side of a central passage, including a kitchen, pantries, an office, rooms for servants and, outside and across the back verandah, meat preparation rooms and a laundry. There is also a verandah on the north side, which links the rooms. This wing superseded the basement service wing, which was then used for storage.

A generator building was built about the same time in the back yard. It is either rendered brick or concrete

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and has a corrugated iron roof. The early bluestone stables and coach house, L-shaped in plan because of a later brick addition (or conversion) survives some distance from the house. It retains much original detailing including the stalls, trellis in the arched entrances and timber louvres in the windows of the loft above the stalls. There is a tack room with the usual fireplace and chimney at the southern end. A large barn or machinery shed closes the yard on the west side. Another smaller barn closes it on the east side.

Much of the major planting in the main garden survives. The range of planting is typical and probably reflects the early twentieth century as much as the second half of the nineteenth. Early photographs show that there was an extensive orchard on the north side of the main garden, which was enclosed by a hedge, and, beyond the yards of the stables, there were vegetable beds. Beyond the front garden, to the north-east of the house there is a dam which dates from the earliest times. This may have been for ornamental as well as practical purposes. The remains of a sheep wash survive at its eastern end.

Some distance from the house, there is the shearing complex including the original woolshed and men's quarters and cookhouse. The accommodation buildings have been altered and added to later. The woolshed is L-shaped in plan with low walls mostly of bluestone although there are sections of hardwood weatherboards, painted white, where the height has been increased for the shearing board and yards. The extensive roof is constructed from long poles of eucalypt and is supported by timber posts left in-the-round. The original sawn battens and timber shingles survive under the later corrugated iron. There is a large dormer window high in the main roof and several low level dormer windows. The woolshed has been altered and extended in corrugated iron along the west side and an engine shed has been added onto the north end.

HISTORY:

The squatting licence for Kanawalla, No. 211 in the Portland Bay district and located on the Wannon River about 12 kms north of Hamilton, was first taken up by George Duncan Lockhart in 1843. At that time it comprised 55,615 acres, nearly four times the average size of runs in the district, and held 20,000 sheep (B&K, 97, 225). According to Don Garden, this represented the "last major stage of occupation of the Grange district" (Garden, 23). In 1846 Lockhart and William Mercer held the licence. In 1851, they subdivided the run into Kanawalla, Mooralla and Plains, later known as Skene. From April 1851, William Skene held Plains.

William Skene was born in Aberdeen in 1808 and arrived in Port Phillip in 1840 (B&K, 140). When Skene married Jane (or Jean) Robertson, the eldest daughter of Thomas Robertson (1785-1872) and Anne Robertson, nee Lauchlan (1787-?), in Melbourne in 1843, he helped found what would become one of the most important pastoral dynasties in Victoria. His father-in-law, who was based at Mount Mitchell, west of Ballarat, established the Thomas Robertson & Sons partnership. Their marriage united the Robertson, Philips, McKellar and Skene families (VPI, Reg. No. 778). The families were Scottish, staunchly Presbyterian, hard working and enduring. The Skenes had at least six children: Ann, born in 14; Thomas, born in 1845 (whose birth is not registered); Jane Catherine, born in 1848; William Robertson, born in 1850; David Alexander, born in 1855; and John Lawrence, born c.1859 (whose birth is not registered) who died as a child in 1863 (VPI, Reg. No. 7710, 8359, 8906, 8374 & 4297). William Skene was an M.L.C from 1870 to 1876 and died March 1877 (VPI, Reg. No. 1575).

Skene lived for a while at Kanawalla "but from about the middle of the decade was at Plains which he re-named Warrumbeech. By 1857 he had so risen in status in the town and the district that he was described as "a gentleman who deservedly commands the esteem of all classes of the community" (Garden, 51). In 1858, Skene sold Kanawalla to Thomas McKellar (1819-1900) who "was the most important of the new pastoralists to arrive in the district in the 1850s. He had migrated from Argyllshire, Scotland, to Port Phillip in 1848 to join a cousin on a station in the Wimmera. In 1849 he purchased the Hyde Park Station near

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Cavendish and in 1855 the nearby Kenilworth North. In 1858 he sold both to buy Kanawalla, the first of a number of properties he was to buy around Hamilton" (Garden, 51).

It seems most likely that William Skene built the two-storey core of the present house by the late-1850s. Clabburn states that it was built in 1858 (Clabburn, 16), but Halmarick suggests that it was built between 1866 and 1867 when William, Jean and their four surviving children travelled abroad (Halmarick, 77). No architect or builder has yet been associated with the construction but, judging by the scale and sophistication of the design, an architect must have been involved. While the conservative late Georgian detailing of the house suggests a date in the 1850s rather than the 1860s, most substantial homesteads were not built until the land was held as freehold after the Land Selection Acts of the 1860s. The Skene licence was cancelled in 1867 and it was about this time that the property's name changed (B&K, 225).

A billiard room designed by John Shanks Jenkins, and perhaps the timber verandah, was added in the 1880s over the basement. He designed other substantial houses, notably Kenilworth (now much altered) and Warrayure whose owners had direct connections with Skene. Although Jenkins became one of the best architects working in the Western District and then had a successful career in Melbourne, there is no certainty that he designed the original house. Described as a civil engineer as well as an architect, Jenkins was Scottish and served his apprentice in Aberdeen. He arrived Melbourne, April 1854 and went to Warrnambool 1854, "where for four years he carried on the business of timber merchant, building contractor, and agricultural implement and machine maker. In 1858 he became town surveyor of Port Fairy, went to Hamilton in a similar capacity in 1860, to Mt Rouse, as shire engineer in 1870 and to Richmond, as town surveyor in 1876" (Sutherland, Vol. 2, 521). He was a prize winning bridge designer, and "gained first prize for the design for Prince's bridge, Melbourne, in conjunction with Mr. Grainger [the father of Percy Grainger]" (ibid.) Interestingly, Jenkins was a pioneer of the eight hours' movement in 1856.

William Skene seems to have protected his holding at 15,873 acres during the 1860s under the attack of the Land Selection Acts, probably through the use of dummies and by buying off speculators (Garden, 101). Some land was lost to the expansion of Thomas Bromell's estate, Hensley Park nearby. Bromell, also an MLC, had humble beginnings. His daughter recalls that he carted goods to the gold fields and for station owners, and specifically that "he carted all the timber and roofing for the first house built at 'Skene' near Hamilton" (HHC, Hensley Park notes). Skene was "deeply involved in town affairs" and, although owning other substantial pastoral properties, "retained Warrumbecch as his base, but in about 1868 changed the run's name again, this time to Skene" (Garden, 71). This interest declined when he travelled abroad and then became a Member of the Legislative Council in the 1870s (Garden, *ibid.*). During the 1860s, "Thomas Skene, the son of William's brother David Skene, managed the property for his uncle" (Halmarick, 76). The Hamilton (later western District) Coursing Club was formed in 1874 and hunts with dogs were held at Skene (Garden, 115).

A member of the next generation, Thomas Robertson, son of John Robertson, the next owner of Skene, took up the newly fashionable game of golf in the 1890s. "Skene was purchased in 1881 by William Skene's brother-in-law, John Robertson (1822-1905), who lived there until his death and maintained its 16,000 acres as one of the best runs in the Western District" (Garden, 141). The sons of William Skene had inherited the property, Thomas (1845-1910), William Robertson (1850-1901) and David (1855-1921). "They possibly disposed of [Skene and Bassett] partly because they were in debt and partly because they intended to move to Mexico where they had an interest in a large holding" (Garden, 142). This venture failed but William and David continued to hold interests in several large and important properties around Hamilton in the 1880s. "In the 1890s the Skenes began to drift away from Hamilton. Thomas developed pastoral interests outside the area and, early in the twentieth century, held the Grampians seat in the House of Representatives. In 1893 William was declared insolvent and left the district, although he was brought back and buried in the

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family vault when he died in 1901. David moved to New South Wales but ended his days in Melbourne where he died in 1921" (Garden, 142).

John Robertson (1822-1905) was born in Glenmuick, Scotland, the son of Thomas Robertson (1785-1815) and his wife Anne Robertson, nee Lauchlan (Halmarick, 28). One of their five children, he must also be seen as a key member of the Robertson dynasty, one of the most important pastoral dynasties in Victoria. He married Mary Jane Carter of Van Diemen's Land at Mount Sturgeon in 1855 (VPI, Reg. No. 2040). The couple moved to the property called Barrahead in the Victoria Valley. "The Victoria Valley licence was most certainly purchased for Thomas Robertson's second son, John, who had just married Mary Jane Carter, a week before the run was acquired. Soon after his marriage, on 10 September 1855, John left Moora Moora and took his new bride to live at Victoria Valley" (Halmarick, 57). "John Robertson managed the station until he took over as owner on the dissolution of the Thomas Robertson & Sons partnership in 1872. He and his wife, Mary, built a homestead and remained there until 1881" (Halmarick, 58). They had seven children, two of whom are registered as born at Victoria Valley. James, their youngest son, although registered at Hamilton was born at Victoria Valley in 1870 (VPI, Reg. No. 23508; Halmarick, 272). From 1881, John and Mary Robertson lived at Skene where both died, she in 1900 and he in 1905 (Halmarick, 28).

Their son James Robertson (1870-1923), who had lived at Skene since he finished school, retained the property after his father's death in 1905. In 1906, he married Joan Naomi Moffat (1884-1922) and they had one child, Joan Naomi (1906-1986). He attempted to sell Skene in 24-acre lots in 1916 but failed (Halmarick, 273). He then leased the property to his father's cousin, William Philip, who intended to buy the station when his son, William Hamilton Philip returned from the war" (ibid.). Then James Robertson sold the remaining 7,670 acres to his cousin, James Gordon Robertson, and moved to the Ritchie property, Blackwood near Penshurst, which he renamed Coolabah (ibid.).

James Gordon Robertson (1859-1923), the fourth child of James and Margaret Robertson, nee Gordon had married Anne Bath Farrer (1859-1935) in 1896 (Halmarick, 136-8). They moved into the new homestead at Kongbool (or Congbool) at Balmoral soon after. They sold Kongbool in 1919, went to live at the mansion Coonac in Toorak and intended to move to Skene but James died in 1923 before the move was completed (Halmarick, 141). The intervening years had been spent building and "Anne completed extensive renovations to Skene which included the concrete façade" (Halmarick, 141). When his father died, James

Rowland Robertson (1900-1974) inherited Skene, although having to wait two years until he turned 25. His mother, Anne Robertson died twelve years later, living in retirement in Hamilton.

No architect has been associated with the design and construction of the large new south-east wing and massive new façade across the original house. Although the two-storey timber verandah was replaced very little was changed internally. The new wing contained a large hall, sitting room and dining room and beyond an extensive range of service rooms.

James Rowland Robertson married Hester Mary Kay (1900-1996) and they had two sons James Gordon, called Jim, who was born in 1926 at Skene and Robert Henry, who was born in 1929. The latter became Australia's ambassador to Argentina from 1989-1992. After James Rowland Robertson died, 3,400 acres were sold to pay for death duties and, as partners, his sons employed the elder's son, James Donald Robertson to manage the property. "In 1996, the partnership was dissolved and Skene was subdivided between the two families with the Skene homestead section being retained by James Donald [Robertson]" (Halmarick, 143). James Donald Robertson is the present Mayor the City of Hamilton.

THEMATIC CONTEXT:

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Theme 3. Developing local, regional and national economies
3.5 Developing primary production
3.5.1 Grazing stock
3.5.3 Developing agricultural industries
3.12 Feeding People
3.12.2 Developing sources of fresh local produce

Theme 5 Working
5.8 Working on the land

CONDITION:

All the buildings and the garden are in good condition.

INTEGRITY:

Excellent degree of integrity, especially to the 1923 period.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

What is significant?

The main house at Skene, formerly known as Plains and then as Warrumbeeceh, appears to date from the late 1850s. It was built for William Skene MLC (1809-1877), one of the most important early pastoralists in the Western District and, by marriage, connected with one of the most important pastoral dynasties in Victoria. He purchased the newly established run after the subdivision of Kanawalla in 1851. Alternatively, the main house may have been built from 1867 while Skene and his family were abroad and after the squatting licence was cancelled. No architect has been associated with the design, although John Shanks Jenkins who designed a new billiard room in 1880 and was active in the area working for clients connected with William and Jane Skene (1816-1895), nee Robertson, may have been responsible for the earlier design. It is one of the most remarkable houses in the Western District because it is not only of two main floors but it has an extensive cellar including a full range of service rooms and a complete attic floor, used as servants' quarters. Substantial outbuildings and working buildings survive from the 1850s, including the very large stone woolshed, some distance from the main house. Men's quarters and other outbuildings associated with the woolshed date from the early 1920s. An extensive landscaped garden and park including a dam intended for ornamental as well as practical purposes complemented the house from its construction. In 1881, William Skene sold to his brother-in-law, John Robertson (1822-1905) and his wife Mary Jane Robertson (1829-1900), nee Carter, who both died at Skene. The property passed to their son, James Robertson (1870-1923) who sold it to his cousin, James Gordon Robertson (1859-1923) in 1919. The latter's wife, Anne Bath Robertson (1859-1835), nee Farrer completed the extensive additions to Skene in 1923. Her son, James Rowland Robertson (1900-1974) inherited Skene when he turned 25 and the property has remained with his descendants since. The whole complex retains an extremely high degree of integrity to its 1923 period and much remains internally from the 1850s period of the house. The condition of different buildings, the garden and the broader landscaping varies but the complex is in very good condition overall.

How is it significant?

Skene Homestead Complex is of historical and architectural significance to the Southern Grampians Shire and to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

Skene Homestead Complex is of historical significance for its direct associations with the very successful pioneering pastoralist, William Skene MLC and his wife, Jane Robertson, its first owners who were responsible for building the main house, its garden, the outbuildings and woolshed. Subsequently, Skene is

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significant for its continuous ownership by the Robertson family, the central branch of one of Victoria's most important pastoral dynasties.

Skene Homestead Complex is of architectural significance as one of the largest and most complete pastoral complexes surviving in Victoria, including the remarkable main house, its extensive 1923 extension, and its outbuildings, all in the original mid-nineteenth century setting and the woolshed and its outbuildings. The main house is also of significance, through the 1880 billiard room addition, as an example of the work of the important architect, John Shanks Jenkins who may have designed the main house.

COMPARISON:

- 050 Kongbool Homestead Complex, Coleraine-Balmoral Road, Balmoral
- 109 Warrayure Homestead Complex, Rudolph's Road, Warrayure
- 114 Bassett Homestead Complex, Bassett Road, Branxholme
- 115 Arrandoovong, Chrome Road off Henty Highway, Branxholme
- 363 Hensley Park Homestead Complex, Hensley Park Rd, Hensley Park
- 461 Old Strathkellar (Garden), Strathkellar Road, Strathkellar

ASSESSED BY: tfh & mgt

ASSESSMENT DATE:

1/03/2004

EXISTING LISTINGS:

HERITAGE STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Include in VHR Include in RNE Include in Local Planning Scheme

No Recommendations for Inclusions

REFERENCES:

Author	Title	Year	Page
Alexander Sutherland, ed.	Victoria and Its Metropolis, Vol II	1888	521
Diana M Halmarick, comp.	Thos. Robertson & Sons "Mainstays of Our Earliest Days"	2000	var.
Donald Garden	Hamilton, a Western District History	1984	var.
Elise Clabburn, et al	Dunkeld and District, a short history	1989	15, 16
R. V Billis & A. S Kenyon	Pastoral Pioneers of Port Phillip	1974	var.

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Skene Homestead, Skene Homestead Road, Strathkellar, 1923 façade

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stalls. There is a tack room with the usual fireplace and chimney at the southern end. A large barn or machinery shed closes the yard on the west side. Another smaller barn closes it on the east side.

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The squatting licence for Kanawalla, No. 211 in the Portland Bay district and located on the Wannan River about 12 kms north of Hamilton, was first taken up by George Duncan Lockhart in 1843. At that time it comprised 55,615 acres, nearly four times the average size of runs in the district, and held 20,000 sheep (B&K, 97, 225). According to Don Garden, this represented the "last major stage of occupation of the Grange district" (Garden, 23). In 1846 Lockhart and William Mercer held the licence. In 1851, they subdivided the run into Kanawalla, Mooralla and Plains, later known as Skene. From April 1851, William Skene held Plains.

William Skene was born in Aberdeen in 1808 and arrived in Port Phillip in 1840 (B&K, 140). When Skene married Jane (or Jean) Robertson, the eldest daughter of Thomas Robertson (1785-1872) and Anne Robertson, nee Lauchlan (1787-?), in Melbourne in 1843, he helped found what would become one of the most important pastoral dynasties in Victoria. His father-in-law, who was based at Mount Mitchell, west of Ballarat, established the Thomas Robertson & Sons partnership. Their marriage united the Robertson, Philips, McKellar and Skene families (VPI, Reg. No. 778). The families were Scottish, staunchly Presbyterian, hard working and enduring. The Skenes had at least six children: Ann, born in 14; Thomas, born in 1845 (whose birth is not registered); Jane Catherine, born in 1848; William Robertson, born in 1850; David Alexander, born in 1855; and John Lawrence, born c.1859 (whose birth is not registered) who died as a child in 1863 (VPI, Reg. No. 7710, 8359, 8906, 8374 & 4297). William Skene was an M.L.C from 1870 to 1876 and died March 1877 (VPI, Reg. No. 1575).

Skene lived for a while at Kanawalla "but from about the middle of the decade was at Plains which he re-named Warrumbeech. By 1857 he had so risen in status in the town and the district that he was described as "a gentleman who deservedly commands the esteem of all classes of the community" (Garden, 51). In 1858, Skene sold Kanawalla to Thomas McKellar (1819-1900) who "was the most important of the new pastoralists to arrive in the district in the 1850s. He had migrated from Argyllshire, Scotland, to Port Phillip in 1848 to join a cousin on a station in the Wimmera. In 1849 he purchased the Hyde Park Station near Cavendish and in 1855 the nearby Kenilworth North. In 1858 he sold both to buy Kanawalla, the first of a number of properties he was to buy around Hamilton" (Garden, 51).

It seems most likely that William Skene built the two-storey core of the present house by the late-1850s. Clabburn states that it was built in 1858 (Clabburn, 16), but Halmarick suggests that it was built between 1866 and 1867 when William, Jean and their four surviving children travelled abroad (Halmarick, 77). No architect

HERITAGE PLACE

NAME OF PLACE: SKENE HOMESTEAD COMPLEX

ADDRESS/LOCATION OF PLACE: Skene Homestead Road STRATHKELLAR

STUDY NUMBER: 0345

HERITAGE OVERLAY NUMBER:

or builder has yet been associated with the construction but, judging by the scale and sophistication of the design, an architect must have been involved. While the conservative late Georgian detailing of the house suggests a date in the 1850s rather than the 1860s, most substantial homesteads were not built until the land was held as freehold after the Land Selection Acts of the 1860s. The Skene licence was cancelled in 1867 and it was about this time that the property's name changed (B&K, 225).

A billiard room designed by John Shanks Jenkins, and perhaps the timber verandah, was added in the 1880s over the basement. He designed other substantial houses, notably Kenilworth (now much altered) and Warrayure whose owners had direct connections with Skene. Although Jenkins became one of the best architects working in the Western District and then had a successful career in Melbourne, there is no certainty that he designed the original house. Described as a civil engineer as well as an architect, Jenkins was Scottish and served his apprenticeship in Aberdeen. He arrived Melbourne, April 1854 and went to Warrnambool 1854, "where for four years he carried on the business of timber merchant, building contractor, and agricultural implement and machine maker. In 1858 he became town surveyor of Port Fairy, went to Hamilton in a similar capacity in 1860, to Mt Rouse, as shire engineer in 1870 and to Richmond, as town surveyor in 1876" (Sutherland, Vol. 2, 521). He was a prize winning bridge designer, and "gained first prize for the design for Prince's bridge, Melbourne, in conjunction with Mr. Grainger [the father of Percy Grainger]" (ibid.) Interestingly, Jenkins was a pioneer of the eight hours' movement in 1856.

William Skene seems to have protected his holding at 15,873 acres during the 1860s under the attack of the Land Selection Acts, probably through the use of dummies and by buying off speculators (Garden, 101). Some land was lost to the expansion of Thomas Bromell's estate, Hensley Park nearby. Bromell, also an MLC, had humble beginnings. His daughter recalls that he carted goods to the gold fields and for station owners, and specifically that "he carted all the timber and roofing for the first house built at 'Skene' near Hamilton" (HHC, Hensley Park notes). Skene was "deeply involved in town affairs" and, although owning other substantial pastoral properties, "retained Warrumbeech as his base, but in about 1868 changed the run's name again, this time to Skene" (Garden, 71). This interest declined when he travelled abroad and then became a Member of the Legislative Council in the 1870s (Garden, ibid.). During the 1860s, "Thomas Skene, the son of William's brother David Skene, managed the property for his uncle" (Halmarick, 76). The Hamilton (later western District) Coursing Club was formed in 1874 and hunts with dogs were held at Skene (Garden, 115).

A member of the next generation, Thomas Robertson, son of John Robertson, the next owner of Skene, took up the newly fashionable game of golf in the 1890s. "Skene was purchased in 1881 by William Skene's brother-in-law, John Robertson (1822-1905), who lived there until his death and maintained its 16,000 acres as one of the best runs in the Western District" (Garden, 141). The sons of William Skene had inherited the property, Thomas (1845-1910), William Robertson (1850-1901) and David (1855-1921). "They possibly disposed of [Skene and Bassett] partly because they were in debt and partly because they intended to move to Mexico where they had an interest in a large holding" (Garden, 142). This venture failed but William and David continued to hold interests in several large and important properties around Hamilton in the 1880s. "In the 1890s the Skenes began to drift away from Hamilton. Thomas developed pastoral interests outside the area and, early in the twentieth century, held the Grampians seat in the House of Representatives. In 1893 William was declared insolvent and left the district, although he was brought back and buried in the family vault when he died in 1901. David moved to New South Wales but ended his days in Melbourne where he died in 1921" (Garden, 142).

John Robertson (1822-1905) was born in Glenmuick, Scotland, the son of Thomas Robertson (1785-1815) and his wife Anne Robertson, nee Lauchlan (Halmarick, 28). One of their five children, he must also be seen as a key member of the Robertson dynasty, one of the most important pastoral dynasties in Victoria. He married Mary Jane Carter of Van Diemen's Land at Mount Sturgeon in 1855 (VPI, Reg. No. 2040). The couple moved to the property called Barrahead in the Victoria Valley. "The Victoria Valley licence was most certainly purchased for Thomas Robertson's second son, John, who had just married Mary Jane Carter, a week before the

HERITAGE PLACE

NAME OF PLACE: SKENE HOMESTEAD COMPLEX

ADDRESS/LOCATION OF PLACE: Skene Homestead Road STRATHKELLAR

STUDY NUMBER: 0345

HERITAGE OVERLAY NUMBER:

run was acquired. Soon after his marriage, on 10 September 1855, John left Moora Moora and took his new bride to live at Victoria Valley" (Halmarick, 57). "John Robertson managed the station until he took over as owner on the dissolution of the Thomas Robertson & Sons partnership in 1872. He and his wife, Mary, built a homestead and remained there until 1881" (Halmarick, 58). They had seven children, two of whom are registered as born at Victoria Valley. James, their youngest son, although registered at Hamilton was born at Victoria Valley in 1870 (VPI, Reg. No. 23508; Halmarick, 272). From 1881, John and Mary Robertson lived at Skene where both died, she in 1900 and he in 1905 (Halmarick, 28).

Their son James Robertson (1870-1923), who had lived at Skene since he finished school, retained the property after his father's death in 1905. In 1906, he married Joan Naomi Moffat (1884-1922) and they had one child, Joan Naomi (1906-1986). He attempted to sell Skene in 24-acre lots in 1916 but failed (Halmarick, 273). He then leased the property to his father's cousin, William Philip, who intended to buy the station when his son, William Hamilton Philip returned from the war" (ibid.). Then James Robertson sold the remaining 7,670 acres to his cousin, James Gordon Robertson, and moved to the Ritchie property, Blackwood near Peshurst, which he renamed Coolabah (ibid.).

James Gordon Robertson (1859-1923), the fourth child of James and Margaret Robertson, nee Gordon had married Anne Bath Farrer (1859-1935) in 1896 (Halmarick, 136-8). They moved into the new homestead at Kongbool (or Congbool) at Balmoral soon after. They sold Kongbool in 1919, went to live at the mansion Coonac in Toorak and intended to move to Skene but James died in 1923 before the move was completed (Halmarick, 141). The intervening years had been spent building and "Anne completed extensive renovations to Skene which included the concrete façade" (Halmarick, 141). When his father died, James Rowland Robertson (1900-1974) inherited Skene, although having to wait two years until he turned 25. His mother, Anne Robertson died twelve years later, living in retirement in Hamilton.

No architect has been associated with the design and construction of the large new south-east wing and massive new façade across the original house. Although the two-storey timber verandah was replaced very little was changed internally. The new wing contained a large hall, sitting room and dining room and beyond an extensive range of service rooms.

James Rowland Robertson married Hester Mary Kay (1900-1996) and they had two sons James Gordon, called Jim, who was born in 1926 at Skene and Robert Henry, who was born in 1929. The latter became Australia's ambassador to Argentina from 1989-1992. After James Rowland Robertson died, 3,400 acres were sold to pay for death duties and, as partners, his sons employed the elder's son, James Donald Robertson to manage the property. "In 1996, the partnership was dissolved and Skene was subdivided between the two families with the Skene homestead section being retained by James Donald [Robertson]" (Halmarick, 143). James Donald Robertson is the present Mayor the City of Hamilton.

THEMATIC CONTEXT:

Theme 3. Developing local, regional and national economies

3.5 Developing primary production

3.5.1 Grazing stock

3.5.3 Developing agricultural industries

3.12 Feeding People

3.12.2 Developing sources of fresh local produce

Theme 5 Working

5.8 Working on the land

CONDITION:

All the buildings and the garden are in good condition.

HERITAGE PLACE

NAME OF PLACE: SKENE HOMESTEAD COMPLEX

ADDRESS/LOCATION OF PLACE: Skene Homestead Road STRATHKELLAR

STUDY NUMBER: 0345

HERITAGE OVERLAY NUMBER:

INTEGRITY:

Excellent degree of integrity, especially to the 1923 period.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

What is significant?

The main house at Skene, formerly known as Plains and then as Warrumbeech, appears to date from the late 1850s. It was built for William Skene MLC (1809-1877), one of the most important early pastoralists in the Western District and, by marriage, connected with one of the most important pastoral dynasties in Victoria. He purchased the newly established run after the subdivision of Kanawalla in 1851. Alternatively, the main house may have been built from 1867 while Skene and his family were abroad and after the squatting licence was cancelled. No architect has been associated with the design, although John Shanks Jenkins who designed a new billiard room in 1880 and was active in the area working for clients connected with William and Jane Skene (1816-1895), nee Robertson, may have been responsible for the earlier design. It is one of the most remarkable houses in the Western District because it is not only of two main floors but it has an extensive cellar including a full range of service rooms and a complete attic floor, used as servants' quarters. Substantial outbuildings and working buildings survive from the 1850s, including the very large stone woolshed, some distance from the main house. Men's quarters and other outbuildings associated with the woolshed date from the early 1920s. An extensive landscaped garden and park including a dam intended for ornamental as well as practical purposes complemented the house from its construction. In 1881, William Skene sold to his brother-in-law, John Robertson (1822-1905) and his wife Mary Jane Robertson (1829-1900), nee Carter, who both died at Skene. The property passed to their son, James Robertson (1870-1923) who sold it to his cousin, James Gordon Robertson (1859-1923) in 1919. The latter's wife, Anne Bath Robertson (1859-1835), nee Farrer completed the extensive additions to Skene in 1923. Her son, James Rowland Robertson (1900-1974) inherited Skene when he turned 25 and the property has remained with his descendants since. The whole complex retains an extremely high degree of integrity to its 1923 period and much remains internally from the 1850s period of the house. The condition of different buildings, the garden and the broader landscaping varies but the complex is in very good condition overall.

How is it significant?

Skene Homestead Complex is of historical and architectural significance to the Southern Grampians Shire and to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

Skene Homestead Complex is of historical significance for its direct associations with the very successful pioneering pastoralist, William Skene MLC and his wife, Jane Robertson, its first owners who were responsible for building the main house, its garden, the outbuildings and woolshed. Subsequently, Skene is significant for its continuous ownership by the Robertson family, the central branch of one of Victoria's most important pastoral dynasties.

Skene Homestead Complex is of architectural significance as one of the largest and most complete pastoral complexes surviving in Victoria, including the remarkable main house, its extensive 1923 extension, and its outbuildings, all in the original mid-nineteenth century setting and the woolshed and its outbuildings. The main house is also of significance, through the 1880 billiard room addition, as an example of the work of the important architect, John Shanks Jenkins who may have designed the main house.

COMPARISON:

050 Kongbool Homestead Complex, Coleraine-Balmoral Road, Balmoral

109 Warrayure Homestead Complex, Rudolph's Road, Warrayure

114 Bassett Homestead Complex, Bassett Road, Branxholme

115 Arrandoovong, Chrome Road off Henty Highway, Branxholme

HERITAGE PLACE

NAME OF PLACE: SKENE HOMESTEAD COMPLEX

ADDRESS/LOCATION OF PLACE: Skene Homestead Road STRATHKELLAR

STUDY NUMBER: 0345

HERITAGE OVERLAY NUMBER:

363 Hensley Park Homestead Complex, Hensley Park Rd, Hensley Park
461 Old Strathkellar (Garden), Strathkellar Road, Strathkellar

ASSESSED BY: tfh & mgt

ASSESSMENT DATE:

01-Mar-04

EXISTING LISTINGS:

HERITAGE STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Include in VHR Include in RNE Include in Local Planning Scheme

No Recommendations for Inclusions

REFERENCES:

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