Heritage Appraisal

Moonee Valley Racecourse
McPherson Street, Moonee Ponds

Prepared for
Charter Keck Cramer

On behalf of
Moonee Valley Racing Club

February 2011
1.0 Introduction

This heritage appraisal has been prepared for Charter Keck Cramer on behalf of the Moonee Valley Racing Club (MVRC) and provides comment on the proposal to demolish the existing brick wall, horse gate and clock, and stabling to the south-west corner of the Moonee Valley Racecourse at McPherson and Dean streets, Moonee Ponds (Figure 1).

We have completed a site visit to the racecourse and have inspected the area identified for ‘further heritage assessment’ in the Moonee Ponds Activity Centre Structure Plan (Figure 3). We note that in providing this advice, we have not inspected or investigated the broader racecourse context, we have focussed specifically on the area identified in the Structure Plan.
2.0 Heritage considerations

The Moonee Valley Racecourse, Moonee Ponds, is not identified in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay of the Moonee Valley Planning Scheme, nor has it been identified in a relevant heritage study. As a result, the racecourse is not subject to the heritage provisions of the Moonee Valley Planning Scheme.

3.0 Moonee Ponds Activity Centre Structure Plan

The Moonee Ponds Activity Centre Structure Plan (2010), prepared by the City of Moonee Valley, and adopted by Council in March 2010, provides strategic direction and a vision for the future growth and development of the Moonee Ponds Activity Centre. The defined Activity Centre boundary includes the commercial centre of Moonee Ponds, the Moonee Ponds railway station and Moonee Valley Racecourse (refer Figure 3).

The Structure Plan has identified a number of places of potential cultural significance within the Activity Centre which are not currently included in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay (Figure 3). The Structure Plan recommends that these places are assessed to determine their heritage significance and whether they should be included in the Heritage Overlay. One of the places identified in the Structure Plan as a place of potential heritage significance is a triangular portion of land to the south-west corner of the Moonee Valley Racecourse (Figure 4; excluding the carpark, but including the main entrance, brick wall, horse gate, stabling areas and parade ground). The Structure Plan does not include a description of potential cultural heritage significance for the place, however, the implementation section of the report indicates that the City of Moonee Valley intends to undertake a heritage assessment for the nominated sites as a priority project within 1-5 years.

Figure 3 Plan showing the ‘sites subject to further heritage assessment’ within the Moonee Ponds Activity Centre. The area subject to this investigation is indicated by the arrow.
Source: Moonee Ponds Activity Centre Structure Plan.
Figure 4 Detail of the area within the Moonee Valley Racecourse subject to ‘further heritage assessment’.  
Source: Moonee Ponds Activity Centre Structure Plan.

4.0 Description

The area we were requested to investigate is situated in the south-west corner of the Moonee Valley Racecourse in the vicinity of McPherson and Dean streets. The area contains a high red face-brick wall divided into sections with indented panels (Figure 5 and Figure 6). The wall features English and stretcher bond patterning and cuts through the south-west corner of the site, dividing an asphaltered horse float parking area (which is within the racecourse site) and the stabling yards within the course. The wall also returns along Dean Street for some distance (Figure 7). The main public entrance to the racecourse is situated to the north of the brick wall (Figure 8). The entrance is a flat roofed structure of separate ticket boxes.

There is a gateway opening in the brick wall (horse gate), which has a terracotta tiled pitched roof and features a weatherboard and timber shingle cupola form clock tower which is located to the centre of the roof form (Figure 9). The lower portion of the gateway which forms part of the brick wall, has been altered, with portions of the gateway appearing to have been constructed in more recent times (Figure 10). The aerial photograph of 1945 shows an opening in the wall in this location, but we are unable to ascertain from this image whether the gateway originally had the roof and cupola feature or not.

The brick wall forms the external wall for the horse stabling stalls which extend along the eastern and northern portions of the wall (Figure 11 and Figure 12). The brick wall is lined with timber battens and the stalls are of timber construction with asphalt flooring. Three structures, which also provide horse stabling, are attached to the southern portion of the wall and extend north perpendicular to the wall (Figure 13). Two of these structures appear on the 1945 aerial photograph; the centre structure has been added since that time. Associated with the stabling area is a fenced asphalt parade ground, landscaped footpaths and garden elements (Figure 14). The 1945 aerial photograph shows a parade ground in a different location, further to the east.
Figure 5  Brick wall and horse gate and the enclosed horse float parking area, looking south-east.

Figure 6  Brick wall and horse gate, looking north-west.
Figure 7  Brick wall elevation along Dean Street.

Figure 8  Main entrance to Moonee Valley Racecourse.
Figure 9   Western (front) elevation of the horse gate and brick wall.

Figure 10   Eastern (rear) elevation of the horse gate, showing clock tower.
Figure 11  Horse stalls/stabling along the eastern side of the brick wall.

Figure 12  Horse stalls and landscaping along the east of the brick wall.
Figure 13  Public spaces in the foreground and additional horse stalls/stabling which is connected to the stabling along the brick wall to the south.

Figure 14  Parade ground.
5.0 Brief history

The Moonee Valley Racecourse was established in 1882, when William Samuel Cox took out a seven year lease over land at Feehan's Farm in Melbourne's north-west. The first race meeting at the track was held on 15 September 1883. An early layout of the racecourse is outlined on the MMBW plan from 1908, and while the track appears to have changed little, the buildings around the course have evolved over time. The history below relates specifically to the brick wall, horse gate and attached stabling, which is the subject of this investigation.

The brick wall located in the south-west corner of the Moonee Valley Racecourse, near McPherson and Dean streets, appears to have been constructed as the exterior wall of the attached horse stalls/stabling, which also formed the boundary wall along the former alignment of McPherson Street, and along Dean Street. Historic plans and photographs indicate that the wall and horse stalls were constructed between 1935 and 1945.

Prior to the 1920s, the south-east boundary of the Moonee Valley Racecourse had a slightly different alignment to the current corner arrangement. MMBW plans dated 1894 and 1908 indicate that McPherson Street connected with a perpendicular ‘private road’ (later Alexandra Road) and did not meet Dean Street (Figure 15). These plans show the boundary of Moonee Valley Racecourse continued to the south following the approximate alignment of McPherson Street to Dean Street. A fence marking the boundary of racecourse property is indicated and several buildings constructed in this corner of the course (Figure 15).

By 1921, the south-west boundary of the Moonee Valley Racecourse had taken on an irregular diagonal alignment. A plan of the City of Essendon included in the 1921 Sands and McDougall directory show this corner of the property bisected by a diagonal boundary running south-east from the corner of McPherson Street and Alexandra Road to Dean Street (Figure 16). It is noted that the boundary wall does not appear on these plans. A MMBW plan dated 1933 shows the same alignment of McPherson Street as indicated on the 1921 plan (Figure 18). This plan also shows a number of narrow and elongated buildings, some of which are constructed along the diagonal south-east boundary of the racecourse. It is likely that these buildings were horse stalls. One of the horse stalls follows a diagonal alignment similar to the extant brick wall/stalls but its angle appears too steep to be the current boundary wall (Figure 17). A 1935 site plan shows the changed alignment of McPherson Street (Figure 18). McPherson Street had been extended to Dean Street following the irregular alignment of the racecourse boundary evident on 1921 and 1933 plans.

Historic aerials from 1945 show new buildings, also thought to be horse stalls, on a diagonal alignment between McPherson Street and Dean Street (Figure 19). These buildings are thought to follow the current alignment of the present boundary of the Moonee Valley Racecourse, with their exterior wall creating the then boundary wall. As such, the wall is thought to date from between 1935 and 1945. Aerial photographs also show a gap between two sections of horse stalls, which presumably formed a horse gate. This appears to be the location of the current horse gate, though the gate itself is a more recent construction.

McPherson Street took on its current alignment in circa 1951, when it was extended vertically south and the irregular formation was abandoned. This change is shown on a 1951 plan for the alterations to the main entrance in the south-east corner of the site, together with the location of the brick wall and horse stalls (Figure 20).

The horse stalls do not appear on a site plan dated 1957 (Figure 21). It is possible, but this has not been confirmed, that the stalls themselves may have been demolished by this time, but it is likely that the exterior wall of the stalls was retained as a marker of the south east boundary of the racecourse. If they were demolished, the stalls were subsequently reconstructed.
Figure 15  Detail of MMBW Plan 2258 of the Town of Essendon, dated 1908. Note McPherson Street is marked as ‘Road’ and does not extend to Dean Street (indicated). North is at top of page. Source: State Library of Victoria.
Figure 16  Sands and McDougall plan showing the Moonee Valley Racecourse in 1921. Note that McPherson Street does not extend to Dean Street. North is at top of page.
Source: State Library of Victoria.

Figure 17  Detail of MMBW Plan No 97, Essendon and Brunswick, 1933. The plan shows a number of horse stalls, one of which follows the current alignment of the boundary wall at the Moonee Valley Racecourse (indicated). North is at top of page.
Source: State Library of Victoria.
Figure 18  Undated but circa 1935 site plan showing the layout of watermains and related infrastructure at the Moonee Valley Racecourse. Note the alignment of McPherson Street (indicated) follows a similar alignment, but not the same alignment, of the boundary wall at the racecourse.
Source: Public Building Files, VPRS 11201, Public Record Office Victoria.

Figure 19  1945 aerial photograph showing the horse stalls at the south-west boundary (indicated). North is at top of page.
Source: University of Melbourne.
Figure 20 Sketch plan showing the extension to McPherson Street and alterations to entrance, ticket boxes and turnstiles, dated October 1951, H J Wagstaff. The extant horse stalls are indicated. North is at top of page. 
Source: Public Building Files, VPRS 11201, Public Record Office Victoria.

Figure 21 Block Plan dated 1957 showing the extension of McPherson Street and the boundary wall (indicated). North is at top of page. 
Source: Public Building Files, VPRS 11201, Public Record Office Victoria.
6.0 Comment

In assessing the potential for demolition of the wall and associated structures it is noted that Moonee Valley Racecourse, and specifically the portion of the site at the corner of McPherson and Dean streets, is not subject to the heritage provisions of the Moonee Valley Planning Scheme.

The red brick wall, horse gate and the attached horse stabling were constructed between 1935 and 1945 following reorganisation of the alignment of McPherson Street. The structures have undergone alteration and additions since that time. As noted above, the horse gate appears to have been altered and portions of the structure constructed in more recent times. The majority of the wall and horse gate are located within the racecourse site, with a portion of the wall extending east along Dean Street. Further, the parade ground in its current location and the main entrance, were constructed during the post-war years.

In terms of the area identified for ‘further heritage assessment’ by the Moonee Ponds Activity Centre Structure Plan, the main public entrance, landscaping and the current location of the parade ground are of little heritage interest and their removal can be contemplated.

As demonstrated on the plans included above, the configuration of the south-west corner of the site changed considerably during the first half of the twentieth century. The wall, horse gate and stabling were constructed between 1935 and 1945 and consequently hold some historical interest in understanding the evolution of Moonee Valley Racecourse and the ongoing use of specific areas within the course (ie. the stabling area). The wall and horse gate, as visible from Dean and McPherson streets, have, in the past, formed a type of boundary to the racecourse (although the current situation includes a further fence which encloses the horse float parking area in front of the wall and horse gate), and as such, they make some contribution to the adjacent public entrance and presentation of the racecourse from these streets. Further, the structures are not of any architectural merit. On this basis our assessment is that the significance of the structures, while of some historical interest, is not of a level which warrants inclusion in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay and, as such, they can be demolished.