



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE*

Wilhelmsen House is significant for the aesthetic qualities imparted by its stone and rendered facades worked in classical details balanced about the domed tower and for the rich decoration of its interior spaces with a fine staircase under a domed roof-light and dark stained timber panelling. (Criterion 1.1)

Wilhelmsen House is significant as having landmark qualities being the visual closure at the west end of the triangular space formed by the widening of Phillimore Street as it approaches Mouat Street. (Criterion 1.3)

Wilhelmsen House is significant as an important element in a nineteenth century precinct, being the focal point of the vista west along Phillimore Street flanked with complimenting facades of the predominantly nineteenth century buildings, some of which are registered by the HCWA, lining each side the street. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Wilhelmsen House is significant as an impressive component of the development of Fremantle associated with the 1890s gold rush and the opening of the Harbour. (Criterion 2.2)

Wilhelmsen House is significant for its close association with the firm Dalgety & Co., a large, prominent merchant company that contributed significantly to the development of Fremantle. (Criterion 2.3)

Wilhelmsen House is associated with J.J. Talbot Hobbs, a prominent Perth architect and community member of the time, responsible for many of Perth's notable buildings. (Criterion 2.3)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

* For consistency, all references to architectural style are taken from Apperly, Richard; Irving, Robert and Reynolds, Peter *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.

SOCIAL VALUE

Wilhelmsen House contributes to the Fremantle community's sense of place as a tangible reminder of the development and prominence of Fremantle as a merchant port at the turn of the twentieth century. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1. RARITY

Wilhelmsen House has particularly fine detailing and rich decoration throughout its interior spaces which is uncommon in extant commercial buildings of this age. (Criterion 5.1)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Wilhelmsen House is representative of nineteenth century shipping offices with the grand business hall and separately tenanted offices upstairs. The P & O Building and Scottish House (residential accommodation upstairs) in the same precinct are examples. (Criterion 6.2)

12.3 CONDITION

Wilhelmsen House is in good condition but subject to the entry of dampness in various places. Repairs are carried out as required and the building appears to have been well treated over the years.

12.4 INTEGRITY

The plan allowed for the shipping company to occupy some of the first floor offices at the western end of the building by providing a second staircase leading up from within the shipping office. However, this staircase has been sealed off at the first floor level and the stair can only be opened in the case of fire. Otherwise the original intention of the building is intact with a shipping agent occupying the shipping offices and various tenancies operating at first floor level.

The current use is compatible, being very close to the use for which the building was designed.

It is likely that the significant values will be sustained in the long term.

Wilhelmsen House has a high degree of integrity as it is close to its original use and displays most of its interior workmanship.

12.5 AUTHENTICITY

A timber structure which included toilets has been removed from the western side of the building and the street facades have been painted. Otherwise most of the original fabric is intact. *Wilhelmsen House* is considered to have a high degree of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The supporting evidence has been prepared by consultants from the Centre for Western Australian History. The documentary evidence has been compiled by Julia Ball, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by John Pidgeon, Architect.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Wilhelmsen House is a two-storey commercial building constructed for Dalgety & Co. in 1902.

Agitation for good harbour facilities had long been seen as a matter of importance for Fremantle merchants. The appointment of Mr C.Y. O'Connor as Western Australia's Chief Engineer in 1891 helped the cause of the merchants. In 1892, after protracted negotiations, O'Connor's design was accepted and construction of the Harbour was commenced. Fremantle Harbour opened in 1897, and Fremantle merchants and the shipping industry slowly experienced a rise in prominence.¹

Frederick Gonnerman Dalgety (b.1817 d.1894) arrived in Sydney in 1834 before moving to Melbourne in 1842 as manager of a new firm.² By 1848, he was an independent and well-to-do merchant. Dalgety continued to prosper, especially during the Victorian gold rush in the 1850s. He returned to England in 1854 to establish the headquarters of a metropolitan-colonial enterprise dealing mainly with Victorian pastoral companies. By 1884, Dalgety, and ten partners, had firms in London, Melbourne, Geelong, Launceston, Dunedin, Christchurch and Sydney. In 1884, the firms were incorporated into a joint-stock company Dalgety & Co., in which Dalgety continued in active management until his death.

Dalgety's importance to Australia was his role in the development of large-scale facilities for financing and organising the production and marketing of rural produce. Between 1884-1887, Dalgety branches were opened in Queensland and Western Australia and the properties and assets of the company grew by 50 per cent. Dalgety & Co. continued to grow after the founder died in 1894. In 1962, merged with the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Co. Ltd with assets of £44 million in 1963.³

Dalgety's in those days were agents for such companies as the Blue Funnel and W.A. Steam Navigation Co. whose ships sailed to Singapore via all north-west ports. Huddsart Parker ran an interstate passenger and cargo service, and mail and passenger services to South Africa, Europe and the United Kingdom.

In February 1900, Dalgety and Company Limited had purchased land in Cliff Street from George Shenton.⁴

On Friday, 29 August 1902, the building was formally opened in the presence of, 'a large and influential gathering of representatives of the commercial and shipping communities'.⁵ In a speech by, Mr A. R. Richardson, mention was made of the impact of a company such as Dalgety & Co. on the Western Australian economy:

The name of Dalgety and Company was almost a household word in Australia. It was a firm of very wide repute, and he need not say of the highest reputation. Messrs. Dalgety and Company could in some measure claim to be public benefactors, for much of the success of the pastoral industry in this State was due to the

¹ Brown, P. *The Merchant Princes of Fremantle: The Rise and Decline of a Colonial Elite 1870-1900* UWA Press, Nedlands, 1996, pp. 13-46.

² Pike, D. (ed) *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol. 4, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1972, pp. 4-5.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Certificate of Title Vol. XII, Fol. 333, 9 February 1900, Office of Titles, DOLA.

⁵ *West Australian* 30 August 1902, p. 2.

financial assistance rendered by the firm to struggling settlers. ... Besides the pastoral industry, the firm was deeply interested in numerous other pursuits, including the shipping, produce, and sandalwood trades. The fact that the Company had spent £40,000 in erecting the magnificent suite of offices in which they were assembled that day showed that they had faith in Fremantle.⁶

The office block, which stands on the corner of Phillimore and Cliff streets, must have more than realised the conception of the designer. The skyline broken up by towers, gables, turrets and ornamental chimneys, presents a most pleasing appearance and is a worthy sentinel at the front door of the State. The two facades have a great variety of architectural features, yet they stand as one harmonious group. ... The structure rests on a very wide foundation of cement concrete. Above the concrete is a base of Melbourne bluestone, and between the base and the first floor cornice the walls are of Cottesloe stone, specially selected. Above the first floor cornice the wall [sic] are of brick and cement dressings. The lookout at the top on the top of the tower is 70ft. from the pavement, and must be seen by the shipping people a good way out. The tower is covered with muntz metal, which has a pleasing appearance, while the roof of the main building is covered with American green slates. As might be expected the entrance doorways have received special treatment in detail.⁷

The description of the interior is of an elaborate and well-designed office space:

... Altogether, the portion of the building reserved for Dalgety's themselves exceeds anything of a kindred nature in the State. ... There are some twenty-five offices to let in single rooms and in suites, and attached to these are lavatories, and strong-rooms, fitted up in the best manner. The lavatory accommodation is of the most complete description throughout the whole building, the pedestal wash-hand basins being beautiful works of art. The whole of the building has been furnished with wires for the electric light, which it is intended to be installed.

The building was designed by and carried out under the supervision of the Mr. J. Talbot Hobbs, F.R.I.V.A., of Perth and Fremantle. It is seldom an architect gets a commission to spend on one plot £30,000. This is the largest contract let (privately) in this State for a building and the result seems to have given the greatest satisfaction to all concerned.⁸

The architect was Mr (later Sir) J.J. Talbot Hobbs, and the contractor, Mr. W.H. Vincent.

Talbot Hobbs (1864-1938) was born in London. He worked as an architectural draftsman to a builder, John Hurst, with whom he migrated to Western Australia in 1887. He began work as a carpenter, but soon set up practice as an architect. Talbot Hobbs became a leader in the small community of architects in Perth. His successful design of the *Weld Club* (1891) led to a number of other commissions for important buildings in Perth and Fremantle. In 1905, he set up the firm Hobbs, Smith & Forbes in which he was the senior partner. Talbot Hobbs was also a committed soldier, pursuing a distinguished military career over his lifetime. His success as an architect and soldier made him an important public figure.⁹

In 1903, the Fremantle Harbour Trust (now Fremantle Port Authority) occupied three rooms in this building until its own premises were available

6 ibid.

7 *Western Mail* 6 September 1902, p. 12.

8 ibid.

9 Nairn, B & Serle, G. (eds) *Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol. 9: 1891-1939* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1983, pp. 315-17.

some months later. Anchor Foods (originally G. Wood, Son & Co.) also operated from here after a bad fire in April 1915.

In 1927, the building was sold to Elder Smith & Co. Limited, from which time the place is presumed to have been referred to as the 'Elders Building'.

During World War Two the place was occupied by the Australian Navy as an intelligence and administration headquarters.

In 1971, a portion of what had become Lot 11 was sold and a new Certificate of Title was issued to Elder Smith & Co. Ltd. for the land which now comprised Lots 3a, 3 and 4, being Lot 10.¹⁰

The place remained in the ownership of Elder Smith & Co. until 1982, when the place was transferred to Ale Nominees Pty. Ltd., the current owners.¹¹ From this time, it was used for a variety of commercial purposes.

In 1997, City of Fremantle Planning approval was provided for a toilet addition.¹² This included demolition of the existing toilet block. The then existing toilet structure was partly cantilevered and partly supported by the adjoining Samson Bond Store building. It was constructed at some stage considerably later the original building. As such it was considered to have no recognisable heritage value.

In January 1999, the place continues to be used as a shipping office at ground floor level and has tenanted offices at first floor level. The place is currently referred to as *Wilhelmsen House*.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Wilhelmsen House is a two-storey Federation Free Classical building with a caretaker's flat in the roof space at the south end of the building. It is of part limestone base, rendered brick walls and corrugated iron roof construction. The place is located at the western edge of the central business district of Fremantle which is rich in nineteenth century buildings.

Wilhelmsen House stands on the south-west corner of Cliff Street and Phillimore Street and with its bulk and its corner tower it provides a fulcrum about which the neighbouring buildings are balanced. It forms a stop to the vista looking west through the triangular space formed by the widening of Phillimore Street as it approaches Mouat Street.

To the north the streetscape is open with the small group of weighbridge buildings and the gatehouse to the port area. To the east is a row of three-storey Federation Free Classical facades and to the west is the facade of the old carbarn building and beyond is the cliff face of Arthur Head. South along Cliff Street is the two-storey Cliff Chambers on the south-east corner of Phillimore and Cliff streets, a gap occupied by a tree, and then the two-storey painted stone facade of the Fremantle Hotel on the corner of Cliff and High streets. On the west side of Cliff Street is an open carpark south of *Wilhelmsen House* and a two-storey building on the north-west corner of Cliff Street and High Street opposite the Fremantle Hotel.

The general layout of the building is a U shape with the open end of the U facing west away from Cliff Street. The space between the legs of the U is the

¹⁰ Certificate of Title, Vol. 575, Fol. 333, 9 November 1971; Vol. 575, Fol. 192A, Office of Titles, DOLA

¹¹ Certificate of Title, Vol. 575, Fol. 192A, 22 October 1982, Office of Titles, DOLA.

¹² City of Fremantle Planning & Development file, 11 Cliff Street, C21/11. Approved 12 December 1997.

light court, this, however is closed off at ground floor level with a single-storey passage and toilet.

Similar elevations front onto Cliff Street and Phillimore Street. The dominant feature is the circular, dragon's scale copper clad, domed turret at the intersection of the streets. The circular plan form of the turret is carried down through the first and ground floor levels and, at street level, accommodates an arched entry leading to the business hall of the ground floor shipping offices.

The facades below the turret have prominent horizontal motifs. These consist of a large projecting cornice dividing the ground floor, clad with rock face limestone (now painted white), and the cement rendered first floor level and a smaller string course at the first floor sill level with a plain rendered band between the two. The band is repeated over the first floor window heads and is topped with a further projecting cornice with dentils under.

The turret at roof level has a series of six-paned windows with round arched heads separated by pilasters with Ionic capitals, while at first floor level this ensemble is repeated with the substitution of Doric capitals.

The turret - tower motif is flanked on each side by a slightly projecting bay of the facade topped by a rendered gable punctured with a central circular window. At first floor level is a wide square headed window divided at third points with rendered masonry mullions and at door head height with a similar transom. At ground floor level the window is the same width but has a shallow three centred arch over the head. The window is divided as for the window at first floor level but with timber divisions. There is a triangular pediment over the transom of the centre division.

The slightly projected sections of the facade, clustering (with the tower motif) at the street intersection, are repeated one bay short of the far ends of the two street elevations. The projecting bay of the Cliff Street facade differs in that the cornices at ground and first floor levels erupt into pediments, a triangular pediment at first floor level and a circular one at ground floor level. These serve to emphasise a secondary entrance giving access to the upper floor offices. At the top of the projection, within the parapet gable, are the windows of the attic dwelling.

In between the projecting bays of the elevations are a series of windows similar to, though narrower than, the windows described for the projecting bays. There are two such banks of windows on the Phillimore facade and three on the Cliff Street elevation.

The south elevation, facing the carpark, is of plain rendered brickwork with a gable terminating the wing running north south along Cliff Street at the eastern end. The high block of the skylight over the stairwell to the secondary entrance in the centre of the elevation with a single-storey gable in front of it. At the western end of the elevation is an east-west running wing with an external steel escape staircase.

The west elevation is as for the south but with the hipped roofed end elevations of the two-storey wings of the U shaped plan on each hand divided by the light court at first floor level and connected by the single-storey toilet structure at ground floor level. At first floor level, near the centre of each of the end elevations of the wings is a door which once gave access from the passage within to a timber construction containing toilets which stood over the lane on the west side of the building. There are numerous pipes and vents fixed to the walls.

The entrance at the street intersection leads to the spacious and lofty business hall of the shipping office (measuring 20 x 9 metres) with intricate plaster mouldings at the ceiling and cornices and carved dark polished timber window and door architraves, those of the windows are shaped to the three centred arched heads. The windows at the projecting bays have dark polished carved and splayed timber lined reveals. The pediments at transom level, noted above from the outside, appear on the inside as polished timber. The door architraves are elaborate with timber pilasters and heavy pediments over the top. The counter curves away from the entrance door and runs the length of the business hall. It is of veneered jarrah with beaded motifs planted on the face. It dates from a later period than the original construction of the building.

The north wall contains the three windows with a fireplace between the window in the bay projecting into the street and the window to the west. The east wall contains one window in the projecting bay to the south of the entrance door. Near the east end of the south wall is an opening with the carved architraves and heavy pediment leading to a passage.

The west wall of the business hall has three arched openings, the centre one wider, with Corinthian columns between and timber framing and glazing reflecting the windows in the external walls. These look onto the office to the west of the business hall.

The office to the west of the business hall measures 9 x 7 metres. The north wall contains the window in a bay projecting towards the street as for the two windows of the main business hall flanking the corner entrance. The east wall has the three arches looking onto the main business hall. The south wall contains a door at the east end and at the west end is open to a stairwell with a timber staircase with dark polished carved balustrading and a Federation leadlight arched window over the half landing and facing onto the light court to the south. The walls of the stairwell have a dark dado following the risers and landings. The west wall contains a door at the south end leading to the most westward of the offices. The door has the heavily carved architraves. Near the centre of the west wall is a projecting chimney breast with a bricked-up fire place and to the north of this is the steel door of the strong room which occupies the north-west corner of the building.

The ceiling of the strong room is of steel beams with concrete topped corrugated iron vaults between. To the back of the strong room door, the remnants of notices referring to the naval operations of World War Two are still adhering.

To the west of the stairwell is a 4 x 4 metre room with a bricked-up fireplace and projecting chimney breast on the south wall and a window in the west wall looking onto the side lane. This room is fitted out as a tearoom.

Passing southwards under the landing of the staircase, a passage leads across the west end of the light court to an 10 x 8 metres office which occupies the south-west corner of the building. This has two double hung windows facing onto the side lane to the west and three facing onto the carpark to the south. The east wall of this area has a frosted glass door near the south end opening through to the stairwell of the secondary entrance from Cliff Street.

At the north end of the west wall is a door leading onto a 4 x 4 metre room with a bricked up fire place in the north east corner. A door in the south wall leads onto the stairwell of the secondary entrance.

A similar room with a bricked up fireplace in the north-east corner lies to the east. Progressing east past a small strong room, an 11 x 5.5 metre room is reached. This room has a window in the east wall looking onto Cliff Street. In the south wall of this room is a door in two leaves opening onto the hall of the secondary entrance from Cliff Street. This door has the heavy carved dark polished architraves and pediment. The north wall of this area has an opening leading to a narrow passage with small offices on each side, the western ones overlooking the light court and the eastern, looking out onto Cliff Street. The passage leads back into the main business hall.

The secondary entrance off Cliff Street has a tall timber arched door in two leaves opening onto a 3 metre wide passage, with rich plaster mouldings and at each end is flanked by pedestals supporting columns with Corinthian capitals in turn supporting arches with moulded voussoirs. The north and south walls are each decorated with two shallow niches formed of pilasters with Corinthian capitals and moulded voussoirs reflecting the treatment each end of the passage.

The passage leads westward to a stairwell measuring 6 x 8 metres and illuminated from above by a vaulted sky light rising from a moulded plaster cornice with dentils at first floor ceiling level. The stairwell contains a grand staircase of dark stained timber with two identical flights, one along the north wall and one along the south, rising to a half landing the width of the stairwell. From the centre of this half landing springs a free standing central flight climbing to the full width landing at first floor level. At the south end of this landing a timber framed and hardboard sheeted cubicle room has been interposed. At the north end of the landing is met by a gallery along the north first floor wall to join a passage serving the rooms to the west. These consist of a tearoom with a glazed door in the south wall leading onto the external steel fire escape stairs and two rooms further west on the south side of the passage and three rooms and a toilet at the western end on the north side of the passage.

East of the stair landing is a 5 x 3 metre hall with pedestals and Corinthian capital columns supporting arches at each end, reflecting the hall directly below. The north wall of this hall has a door leading to a series of three rooms running to the north with windows looking west onto the light court. The south wall of the hall has a door leading to a room at the south west corner of the north south running wing along Cliff Street. The eastern arch of the hall leads to the long north-south running passage with moulded cornices, pressed metal dados and carpeted floors.

At the south end of the passage is a door leading to stairs giving access to the attic dwelling at the third floor level. This area could not be inspected. Four doors spaced along the east side of the passage give access to offices with windows overlooking Cliff Street. At the north end, the passage rises up three stair risers. Here the passage turns westward and continues for some 12 metres before descending again to the general floor level. This rise in floor level allows an increased ceiling height for the main business hall which lies below.

At the east end of the east-west running passage is a door leading into the offices at the Cliff Street/Phillimore Street corner of the building. These have the two windows in the elevational projections and the windows following the curve between them. There are light weight partitions dividing this area. There is an opening in the brick wall leading to the next office to the west which has a splayed fireplace in the north-east corner. This is over the fireplace in the main business hall below. This office has a door in the south

wall leading back into the east-west running passage. Across the passage from this door, where the light court should be, is a steel strong room door which could not be opened. Between this and the staircase leading up from the shipping office at the ground floor is a room looking south onto the light court. West of the stair are men's and women's toilets.

On the north side of the passage is a room with a window in the elevational projection. This room has a fireplace and projecting chimney breast on the west wall. The room to the west of this directly over the strong room has a steep ladder built in at the south-west corner leading to a manhole giving access to the roof space.

The roof space has a wide catwalk which leads eastwards over large ceiling joists and through roof trusses to give access to the circular brick tower at the north west corner of the building. The headroom is ample and one can walk to the tower and then south for a short distance. Another ladder within the tower leads up to the roof space of the dome over the tower.

The building is generally in good condition. The shipping office manager stated that there are periodical problems with water entry. There is evidence of on-going maintenance and improvement to the building fabric. Changes include the removal of the two-storey timber toilets at the west of the building, which were said to have been in a very poor state, and the painting of the street elevations, which has lessened the aesthetic impact of the place. However, much of the value remains in the survival of the decorative elements of the street facades, albeit under paint, and the preservation of the lavish interior.

13.3 COMPARATIVE INFORMATION

13.4 REFERENCES

No key references.

13.5 FURTHER RESEARCH
