

Development Update

520-522 Rathdowne Street North Carlton

In November 2013, just a year after the VCAT hearing which approved the scheme, the building which had stood at 520-522 Rathdowne Street for more than ninety years was demolished in preparation for redevelopment of the site and the erection of five apartments over four levels. Because the original plans, made public in late 2011, had been opposed by Yarra Council and a number of residents, various amendments were made before and during the VCAT hearing to address these concerns. They included changes to the front of the building and the fence to make it less obtrusive in the Rathdowne streetscape and measures to reduce overshadowing and deprivation of sunlight to adjoining properties. Final approval came with a requirement that the developer reduce by half the area of the fourth level to order to lessen the visual impact when viewed from the north and south.

The original building was a simple brick rectangle with a small shopfront where dry cleaning services were available from 1941 to 2011. Its very tall chimney was a vantage point much-used by the local magpies. From the outset Council did not oppose total demolition, accepting that the structure, dating from the early 1920s, was out of character with the Victorian shops and houses that surrounded it. A group of residents commissioned a heritage report which included suggestions for an alternative development retaining the façade, but nothing came of this. The unusual history of this site thus made it particularly vulnerable to development and is a direct cause of Rathdowne Street's acquiring what many see as a very inappropriate apartment building.



Photographed by CCHG in 2011

Side entrance via laneway off Richardson Street, showing tall chimney and large wooden door.



Photographed by CCHG in 2011

520-522 Rathdowne Street North Carlton

Dry cleaner's shopfront, with deco-style pediment, built in the 1940s on the site of Martin Shelley's garage.

Ardblair, built in the 1886, appears partly obscured on the right hand side.

Through the 1880s builder William Gow was active in North Carlton. In 1879 he bought the land at 687 (now Local Burger Co) on the south west corner of Rathdowne Street and Curtain Street as well as the site at 683 where he built a house which he occupied until 1885. In 1882 he bought from its builder the house between his two properties and let it to a series of tenants. The corner block was used as his builder's yard. At almost the same time, in 1881, Gow's wife Sophia bought the three sites at 518, 520 and 521 on the east side of the street and almost as far north as Richardson Street. In 1886 William Gow built on the first of these sites a fine double-storey terrace house, *Ardblair*, the name a reference to his native Perthshire. The Gows moved in and 520 and 522 became his builder's yard which enabled him to build the shop on the Curtain Street corner in 1888. In the same year he mortgaged it to Anthony Ford.

1893 was a particularly bad Depression year and not only did Gow sell 683, 685 and 687 to Ford, but William and Sophia vacated *Ardblair* which became the North Carlton police station. The adjoining land at 520-522 was also leased to the police and seems to have been used for stabling and as an exercise area for their horses. The availability of this extra land may well have been decisive in the choice of 518 for the police station.

The leasing of 518 and the adjoining land to the police from 1893 onwards was a very significant occurrence. Had *Ardblair* continued as a private residence after 1893, it is likely that 520 and 522 would have been built upon by the turn of the century and these buildings would have been in Victorian style. But in fact construction on this land had to wait until the early 1920s, when the police station moved to Amess Street and *Ardblair* again became a private house.

In 1921 Martin Shelley, who had previously been at two different addresses further south in Rathdowne Street, built a motor garage and service station on the vacant land. It was a double site and had good access not just from Rathdowne Street itself, but also through a large wooden door at the end of a short lane running parallel to the main road. (For occupants of the new apartments, this lane will provide access to their parking area.) At first the building covered only the front half of the site with a yard at the rear where two underground petrol tanks were installed. But this area was soon, probably before the end of the 1920s, included in an extended building which took up the whole site.

Two decades after it was built, the building became a dry cleaner's. A shallow shop front with a simple deco pediment replaced what would have been a wide entrance similar to that onto the side lane. The use and appearance of 520-522 Rathdowne Street then remained unchanged for seventy years. Ironically, if the 1940s alteration had not been made, the case for preserving the façade would have been much stronger.