

Heritage Hound News

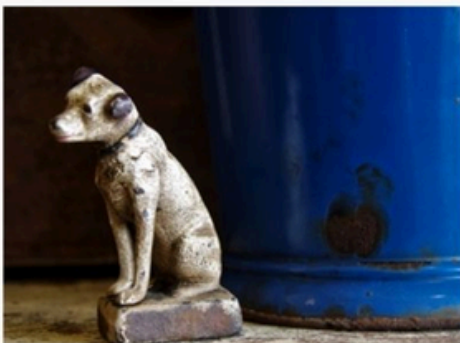
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Holiday Edition

The "Heritage Hound" is brought to you by Dominic Romeo Historic Property.

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Hi Heritage Hounds

I have been extremely busy, particularly on the sales front, with some beautiful historic homes now sold and some nice ones on the way in early 2026.

I thought I would write about an amazing historic estate in the Western District of Victoria, which I sold in 2022 to a wonderful couple, Neil and Jane Gibbs.

At the time of sale, the house and stables were in an extremely poor state of repair. There was strong interest in the sale, but it wasn't just a question of money, more so finding a buyer who was "mad" and excited enough to take on the huge restoration task.

Last Thursday (11.12.25), Marie and I were invited to Berrambool for the big Restoration Australia reveal. Restoration Australia has been following this amazing restoration story for the past 2 years and will be featured next year on the ABC. This will be one not to miss. The house now looks spectacular, and it is such a credit to Neil and Jane for having the energy to tackle such a huge project.

I decided to write on the history of the property and show images of the house prior to restoration and some images I took at the Restoration Australia reveal last week.

If you have any questions about this property or any other property please feel free to contact me.

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History of Berrambool Wickliffe, Victoria

Berrambool is one of country Victoria's finest country houses. Situated several kilometres outside the township of Wickliffe, in the Western District of Victoria, the homestead, stables and woolshed are of architectural and historic importance dating back to the 1860's.

Before detailing the historic and architectural attributes associated with Berrambool, it is important to have an understanding of the early settlement history which led to these grand houses being built.

From the 1820's, settlers from both N.S.W and Van Diemen's Land were increasingly eager to take up grazing land in new regions beyond the settled districts in N.S.W and Van Diemen's Land.

During the 1830's, with the illegal settlements of Portland and Port Phillip, the N.S.W Government was forced to officially proclaim the Port Phillip District in the Colony of N.S.W. The Henty Brothers, who were determined on pastoral expansion and obtaining more land, had already set up an illegal occupation as 'squatters' at Portland Bay in 1834. 'Squatter' was a term applied to pastoralists who took illegal possession of land before depasturing licences were introduced in 1836. Depasturing licences permitted settlers to graze stock on Crown Lands and also allowed grazing to happen beyond the limits of the location.

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With glowing reports by Major Mitchell about Western Victoria, more squatters arrived from Van Diemen's Land and N.S.W. The squatters saw the new plains as a region set for pastoralism. Major Mitchell expressed this sentiment in a journal:

"As I stood, the first intruder on the sublime solitude of these verdant plains as yet untouched by flocks and herds, I felt conscious of being the harbinger of mighty changes there; for our steps would soon be followed by the men and the animals for which it seemed to have been prepared".

Even Thomas Chirnside of Werribee Park lauded the district as *"Eden – it is the greatest extent of rich country I ever witnessed within my recollection"*.

Another squatter romanticised, *"The country between Timboon and the Hopkins River would remind any person lately from home of a nobleman's park, with the exception of coming soon to a magnificent house"*



View towards the Grampians

Scottish immigrants made up the largest group amongst the squatters. Settlers adapted to the land to suit their needs and built living quarters and outbuildings. These usually began as rudimentary buildings of only one or two rooms made of slab, logs or wattle-and-daub. Wattle and daub is a method of constructing walls in which vertical wooden stakes, or wattles are woven with horizontal twigs or branches, and then daubed with clay or mud.

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Outbuildings such as stables and woolsheds followed vernacular styles. For more prominent buildings, basalt was widely used. Rarely were squatter's homes mansions of architectural pretension, especially during the early period of settlement and establishment. As pastoralists grew in wealth, so did the homesteads, which became symbols of that wealth and success.

During the early 'Victorian' period, elements of Tasmanian derived, Georgian styles persisted. New styles were not adopted until later. The early homesteads were usually single storied, built of bluestone blocks and with elegant proportions. With wealth came elaborate homes, with owners of these vast pastoral properties often commissioning architects to design their new homes. Some of these homes were based on pattern-book designs - a book of architectural designs and plans, whilst others drew on styles from their homelands. Many of the homes on larger pastoral properties developed into administrative centres for these busy estates, with many resembling small villages – including a number of domestic outbuildings, school houses for the children of farm workers, gatehouses and servants' quarters.

During the 1850's – 1860's, squatters reclaimed considerable holdings, which generally fronted rivers or creeks. Once freehold titles had been taken up, a large part of Western Victoria was occupied by only a handful of families - including the Moffatts. This was the era of the "squattocracy".

This referred to squatters who occupied large tracts of Crown Land without having any legal rights to the land, but eventually gained ownership as they were the first European settlers in the area. Eventually, the term squattocracy, a play on "aristocracy", referred to squatters and the social and political power they possessed. As a result, many of the pastoral families sought to perpetuate the notion of the "big house".

One of the main squatting runs in what was to become known as the Wickcliffe area was Hopkins Hill, comprising of 98,000 acres on the Hopkins River, taken up by T. and A. Dennistoun and Co. in 1840. The Hopkins Hill run, contributed to the establishment of a wool growing industry in the district.

John Moffatt was born in Westfield, West Lothian, Scotland, in 1817 to his parents, Mary and John Moffatt. In 1839, at the age of 15, John migrated to Van Diemen's Land. Shortly after, he moved to Port Phillip District to take up employment as a shepherd for the huge pastoral land holding company known as the Clyde Company. The Clyde Company had large land holdings in the Western District of Victoria, one being Hopkins Hill.

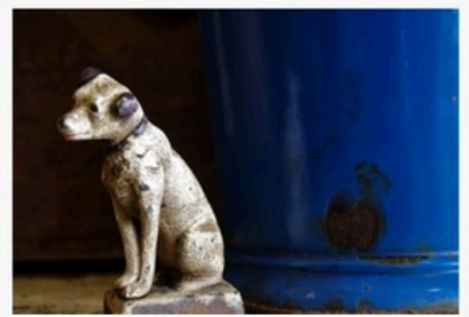
He also went to work at The Grange in Hamilton, owned by Captain William Lonsdale, as an overseer. In 1854, Captain Lonsdale put The Grange up for sale. John Moffatt bought The Grange and proceeded to buy more land around it, becoming the owner of the largest land holding in the now Hamilton District.

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During the early 1850's there was a prediction of financial doom directed at the squatters. The Clyde Company decided to sell Hopkins Hill. John Moffatt was able to buy the property where he worked as a shepherd 15 years prior.

In 1857, John Moffatt took over Hopkins Hill and in 1859, subdivided the run into Boortkoi, Berrambool, Salt Creek and Flat Top Hill, then leased out each property.

Berrambool was leased to Josiah Austin, Thomas Maidment and Thomas Millear, who also leased large neighbouring properties, including the Austin property "Barwon Park".

In 1859, he built Chatsworth House for £20,000 pounds, and given his relatively small freehold, many thought that this lavish investment would ruin him.



Chatsworth House

Berrambool homestead was built in 1864 by Scottish stonemasons using stone quarried from the property. The house was designed by Hamilton architect, James H. Fox. James had previously designed Chatsworth House for John Moffatt. Moffatt chose James Fox as he was responsible for the design of the Chirnside mansion Werribee Park. In 1865, under instructions from Charles Willis, Berrambool was put up for auction. It was described at the time as;

"The beautifully situated estate of Berrambool, on the Hopkins River, 5 miles from Wickcliffe, containing from 7000 to 8000 acres of open timbered and splendid grazing land, well and securely fenced, and permanently watered, independently of the Hopkins River, together with 8000 sheep of mixed sexes and ages".

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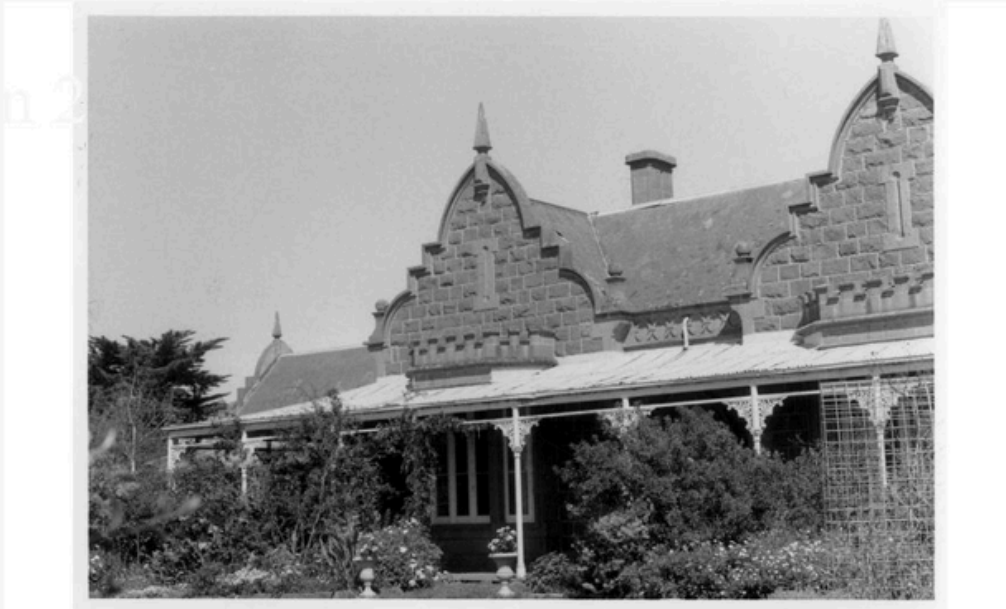
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The improvements consists of a substantial stone dwelling house of seven rooms, pantry, school room, kitchen, servant's rooms, laundry, stone store, woolshed, huts, drafting yards, horse and cultivation paddocks; in fact, every convenience and requisite for a station. A fine garden well stocked with vines and fruit trees".

It appears the property was not sold, but leased instead to Thomas Maidment.

In 1868, Hamilton Architect James H. Fox called for masonry labourers to carry out works at the Berrambool station, and in 1868 and 1871, John Moffatt called for tenders for the creation of new buildings at Berrambool. It is believed this included the Stables built in 1868.



Berrambool Homestead

By the time of his death in 1871, John Moffatt was earning 35,000 pounds per annum from the rental income of his properties.

In 1871, John Moffatt died, leaving much of his property to his brothers and sisters. He had a net worth of 350,000 pounds.

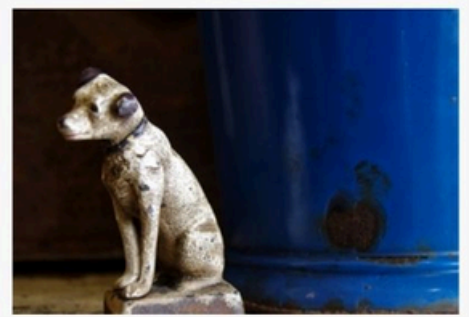
In 1876, Messrs, Austin, Maidment and Millear conducted a clearing sale of livestock and plant at Berrambool, due to the expiration of their lease. Berrambool was again advertised for lease in 1883.

In 1890, an additional wing with glass-panelling, which linked the main wing to the gallery and bedrooms, was added to the Berrambool homestead. A conservatory was also added between the new wing and house.

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In the same year, the woolshed was extended to accommodate 1300 sheep and 16 Wolseley machines for shearing.

By 1899, 24,000 pure Merino sheep were shorn annually at Berrambool. The property also carried 500 head of Hereford/Short Horn cross and Red Poll cattle, as well as 50 horses.

The property remained in the hands of the Moffatts until 1903, when the family sold it off in lots. *Berrambool* - comprising 20,240 acres was purchased by William Moffatt, John Moffatt's Scottish nephew. William made further improvements around the beginning of the century, adding a modern electric light service and a sewerage system with septic tanks. William Moffatt retained ownership of *Berrambool* until soldier settlement commenced after World War 2. The homestead, which at this stage was vacant, soon provided temporary accommodation for settler families. In 1947, the *Berrambool* estate was subdivided into 10 blocks of approximately 700-800 acres for soldier settlement.

In the 1960's the property was purchased by the Holyman family. A description at the time noted that *Berrambool* was well known for its architecture, especially the fine bluestone mouldings and moulded Gothic doorways

At the time, the garden was planted with oaks, elms and poplars, and the house continued to be supplied with water from an underground bluestone tank and a brick tank. The property was restored in the 1960s by the Holyman family.

Today *Berrambool* is privately owned.

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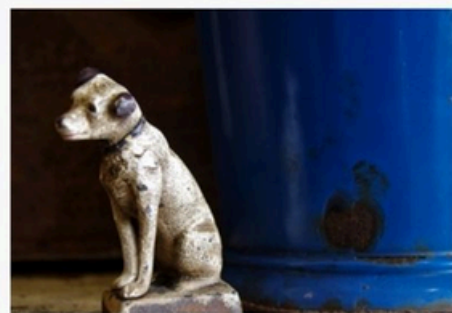
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Berrambool Homestead

The homestead is a single storied building constructed of bluestone quarried from within the property, with a slate clad roof. It is designed in a Victorian style with Elizabethan and Gothic style features.

The house is entered through a bluestone Gothic arched doorway with bluestone mouldings. The interior features very high plaster ceilings, the centrepieces and cornices of which are picked out in gold leaf in the traditional manner. The two front rooms, the library and drawing room, are bay windowed, over thirty feet long, and lead off the high ceilinged spacious hall, which has beautiful plaster cornices and panelled recessed doors with high arched wooden canopies. The hall has an impressive Victorian Moorish style archway leading to several grand formal and informal rooms, bedrooms and the domestic quarters of the house.



Main entry - Berrambool

The stonework at *Berrambool* is exceptional. The homestead is highly accomplished with smooth ashlar (finely dressed stone), contrasting with quarry-faced stones to highlight the features. As an example, the main walls have quarry-faced stones and are rough in texture, while the quoins (quoins are masonry blocks at the corner of a wall) and edges are smooth ashlar.

The two front gables of the house and the projecting gable on the northwest corner, have bluestone parapets in a highly decorative Elizabethan style with a central keystone and pointed finial to the apex, the lower pillars have baubles at the base on either sides.

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Front of Berrambool showing the bluestone parapets, central keystone, finials and baubles.

An exceptional feature is the two front gables, which have castellated bay windows – best seen in the next image, prior to the verandah being added. Between the bay windows is the central front door, which has a wide Gothic arch opening with glazed timber framed doors as highlight windows fitting the shape of the pointed arch. Above the door is a carved stone frieze with a stylised leaf motif. The chimneys have a quarry faced and ashlar stone base with a narrower stem of only ashlar and flat projecting capping stones.

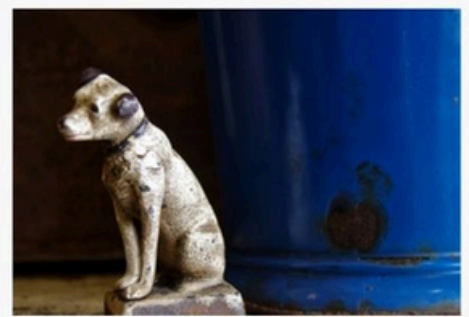
All sash windows are timber framed throughout the house.

There is a concave profile verandah around the homestead on three sides. Originally, when the house was built in 1864, the north side - or river side of the house - was the only section with a verandah – see the next image. The verandah floor is timber with cast iron decorative posts..

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Berrambool c. 1864

There is a long wing running north-south and projecting from the west on the southern side of the house. This wing was added in 1890, for use as bedrooms and a conservatory. The eastern elevation of this wing contains a band of timber framed double hung windows with divided panels and coloured glass. The south gable end contains an Elizabethan style parapet with the same detailing as the parapet gables on the main wing of the homestead. This decorative parapet was replaced from the original south section of the house and relocated at the end of the extension in 1890.

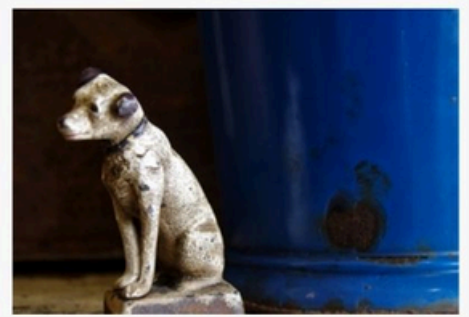


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Parapet gables removed from the south side of the house



The slate clad roof has two tones of slate laid in a fish scale pattern with wide bands of each colour forming stripes

Berrambool Stables

The stables at *Berrambool* are some of the finest in the Western District of Victoria and are of aesthetic significance as an early and substantially unaltered building relating to a pastoral property dating from the 1860's.

The building is an excellent example of the Victorian Gothic style. The stables are also the work of Hamilton architect James H. Fox and are located to the west of the homestead. The complex contains the central stables, a coach house, groom's quarters and single men's quarters – consisting of a cookhouse, dining room and bedrooms. An open machinery shed is at the southern end of the stables and wooden stalls at the northern end. The stables were built in 1868 and constructed of bluestone and have a long rectangular footprint running north and south with a gable roof.



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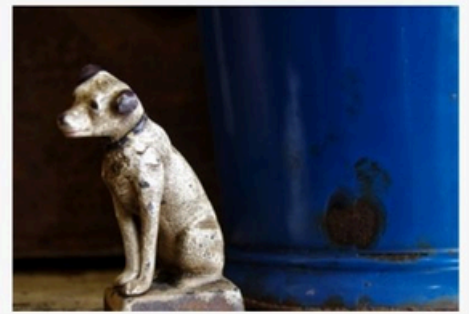
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The workers' quarters and the northern stalls were added in 1890. The stables have decorative timber bargeboards designed in the Victorian Gothic style, with a finial, high central Gothic arch window and solid double doors. Other doors on the front of the building also have pointed arch openings.



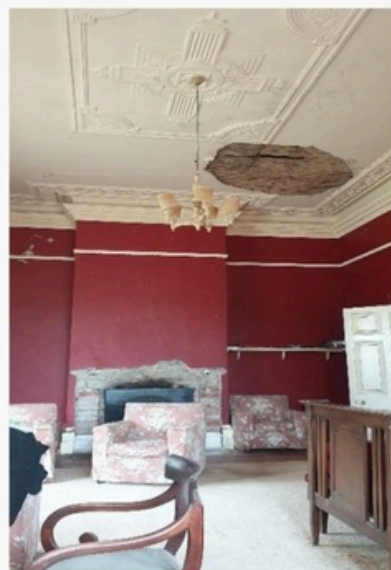
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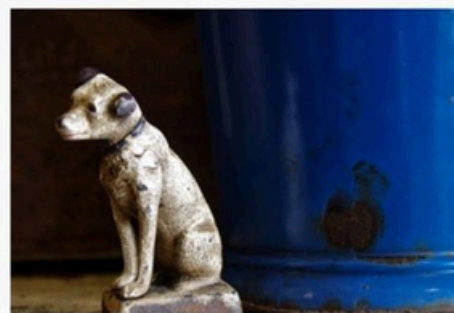
Berrambool prior to restoration



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Berrambool prior to restoration



Berrambool today

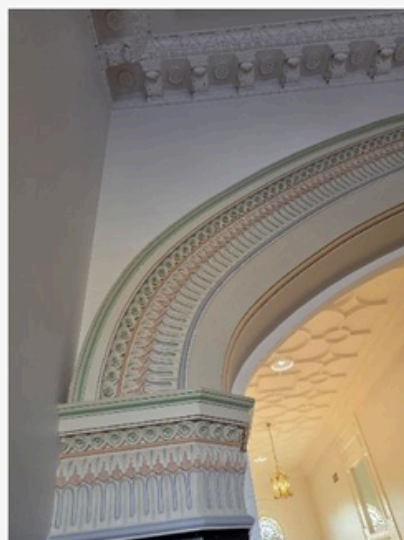
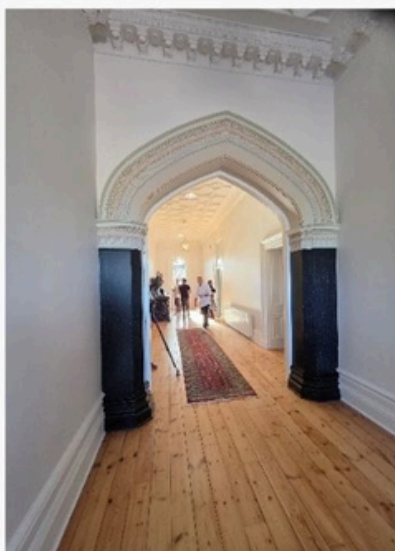


The front verandah has been removed to reflect the original design.
The front verandah was added later

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Neil and Jane at the Restoration Australia reveal

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