Moreton Bay Fig Tree, Part of 2-6; 6A, 8 Russell Street, 420, 436-438, 440 High Street, 80 Williams Road, Prahran

Heritage Place: Moreton Bay Fig Tree
Address: Part of 2-6; 6A Russell Street, 8 Russell Street, 420, 436-438, 440 High Street, 80 Williams Road Prahran

HO Reference: HO777
Citation status: Final
Date Updated: 5 April 2024

Designer: N/A
Builder: N/A

Year planted: c.1880s



Photograph of the Moreton Bay Fig Tree at part of 2-6; 6A, 8 Russell Street, 420, 436-438, 440 High Street and 80 Williams Road, Prahran. *Source*: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2022.



Location map and extent of the Moreton Bay Fig Tree at part of 2-6; 6A, 8 Russell Street, 420, 436-438, 440 High Street and 80 Williams Road, Prahran.

Heritage Group: Parks, gardens and trees
Heritage Type: Tree

Key Theme: Building suburbs
Key Sub-theme: Creating leafy suburbs / Gardens

Significance Level: Local

Controls:	☐	External paint controls	☐	Internal alteration controls	■ Tree controls
	☐	Include on Victorian Heritage Register	☐	Incorporated Plans	☐ Outbuildings and fences not exempt
	☐	Prohibited uses may be permitted	☐	Aboriginal Heritage Place	☐ Solar energy system controls

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

The Moreton Bay Fig Tree (*Ficus macrophylla*) at part of 2-6; 6A, 8 Russell Street, 420, 436-438, 440 High Street and 80 Williams Road, Prahran is of local heritage significance. The altered landscape and grounds are not significant.

How is it significant?

The Moreton Bay Fig Tree is of local historical and aesthetic significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

The Moreton Bay Fig Tree is of historical significance as a mature ornamental tree planting associated with the emergence of private suburban gardens in the municipality during the late nineteenth century. A feature of freestanding middle-class villas, these gardens and their accompanying plantings not only encapsulated the suburban ideal of *ruse in urbe* (country in the city), but also established the municipality's upper-middle class pockets as leafy suburban areas. As a remnant of the former suburban garden at the rear of 80 William Street, Prahran, the Moreton Bay Fig Tree demonstrates a key landscape feature of late nineteenth century middle-class suburban development. (Criterion A)

The Moreton Bay Fig Tree is of aesthetic significance as a pronounced and striking tree planting. It is distinguished by its impressive height, wide and dense spreading canopy and characteristic thick, buttressing trunk. These features, combined with its corner siting and visibility, form a prominent landscape feature at the intersection of two main thoroughfares. (Criterion E)

HERCON Criteria Assessment

A	*Importance to the course, or pattern of our cultural or natural history*	The Moreton Bay Fig Tree is of historical significance as a mature ornamental tree planting associated with the emergence of private suburban gardens in the municipality during the late nineteenth century. A feature of freestanding middle-class villas, these gardens and their accompanying plantings not only encapsulated the suburban ideal of *ruse in urbe* (country in the city), but also established the municipality's upper-middle class pockets as leafy suburban areas. As a remnant of the former suburban garden at the rear of 80 William Street, Prahran, the Moreton Bay Fig Tree demonstrates a key landscape feature of late nineteenth century middle-class suburban development.

B	*Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of our cultural or natural history*	This place does not meet this criterion.
C	*Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of our cultural or natural history*	This place does not meet this criterion.
D	*Important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or environments*	This place does not meet this criterion.
E	*Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics*	The Moreton Bay Fig Tree is of aesthetic significance as a pronounced and striking tree planting. It is distinguished by its impressive height, wide and dense spreading canopy and characteristic thick, buttressing trunk. These features, combined with its corner siting and visibility, form a prominent landscape feature at the intersection of two main thoroughfares.
F	*Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period*	This place does not meet this criterion.
G	*Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of the continuing and developing cultural traditions*	This place does not meet this criterion.
H	*Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in our history.*	This place does not meet this criterion.

Description

- ### Physical Analysis

The Moreton Bay Fig Tree (*Ficus macrophylla*) is located in the backyard of the residences at 2-6 and 6A Russell Street, Prahran. The canopy of the trees also extends to part of, 420, 436-438, 440 High Street and 80 Williams Road. The tree has a single wide buttressed trunk with two main branches spreading from the base of the tree. Unlike other varieties of Ficus trees, including the related *F. macrophyll*a subsp. *columnaris*, this Moreton Bay Fig tree lacks the distinct aerial roots that appear as subsidiary trunks when the tree matures. It has a wide spreading canopy overshadowing the townhouse complex, and is situated within a raised

circular garden bed edged with concrete blocks and pavers and surrounded by hardstand, including the adjoining carpark and bin enclosure, and fencing. Due to its impressive size, it forms a prominent landscape feature and part of the skyline as seen from High Street.

The Moreton Bay Fig Tree is considered in good condition however there is some evidence of poor pruning techniques in the centre of the tree, resulting in a loss of canopy between the two main leaders. While its immediate surrounds have changed substantially, the tree remains in situ within a contemporary townhouse development.

- Alterations and Addition

- Former garden surrounds subdivided (tree previously situated within a Victorian era garden at the rear of 80 Williams Road, Prahran).
- Former garden surrounds re-landscaped and replaced with a contemporary residential development.
- Addition of a raised circular garden bed edged with concrete blocks and pavers to the base of the Moreton Bay Fig Tree.

History

- Historical Context

The area presently known as Stonnington is the traditional home of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong peoples of the East Kulin Nation. Formerly characterised by pre-contact plains, grassy woodland, and floodplains on the banks of the Yarra River (Birrarung), Gardiners Creek (Kooyong Koot) and Hawksburn Creek (now channelised), this once thriving habitat provided Traditional Owners access to a range of water, plant and animal resources integral to their way of life. The onset of colonialism not only saw the transformation of these landscapes, but also Woi wurrung and Bunurong displacement through violence and land dispossession, as is evident in the establishment of George Langhorne's Aboriginal Mission Station Reserve along the southern banks of the Yarra River in present day Prahran and Toorak. Operating under the guise of 'protection', this reserve ultimately became a focal point for segregation, dislocation, and colonial control of Aboriginal people's lives (Context Pty Ltd 2009, 31).

Despite decades of ongoing dispossession, the rich cultural heritage of Traditional Owners in Stonnington has an enduring presence to this day. Through continued resistance and the passing down of Indigenous knowledge, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong people maintain an ongoing connection to, and care for Country.

European settlement in what would become the suburb of Prahran grew gradually following the 1849-1850 Crown Land Sales, which saw the subdivision of land bounded by present day Toorak Road, Orrong Road, Dandenong Road and Punt Road into fifty-one allotments (Context Pty Ltd 2009, 39). George Langhorne, the Commissioner of an 1837 Aboriginal mission in the area south of the Yarra River around Punt Hill, called this area 'Pura-ra-ran', a compound of two Bunurong words believed to mean land partially surrounded by water (O'Callaghan 1922, 54). In 1840 the name was changed to Prahran for official use.

While higher ground overlooking the Yarra to the north of Prahran was quickly acquired and settled by the colonial elite following the 1840 Crown Land Sales, the majority of present-day Prahran, being of poorly drained low-lying land characterised by wetlands, was primarily

purchased by land speculators. These areas were subsequently and re-sold for farming, industry and housing the working classes. The high level of natural deposits of alluvial clay in the area meant that pockets of low-lying land were used as brickyards (Context Pty Ltd 2009, 17). By 1856, the land encompassing Prahran was primarily characterised by a scattered series of timber and brick workers cottages set on narrow allotments to the west of Williams Road, while land to the east and south remained undeveloped or in use as paddocks (Surveyor-General's Department 1856). The area was also distinguished by its strong market garden character during this period, with much of the land awaiting development being used for cultivation during the 1850s and 1860s (Malone 1983, 12).

The area underwent a period of rapid change following the 1880s land boom, which spurred the replacement of many small, mid-nineteenth century cottages with more ornate, single-fronted Victorian and Edwardian style terraces that could house the influx of factory workers as part of the area's growing brick manufacturing, food processing and textiles industries around Chapel Street and Commercial Road. Additionally, upper-middle class enclaves and mansion estates in the formerly undeveloped area of eastern Prahran were also developed to house the wealthy settling adjacent to the suburb of Armadale (Malone 2000, 20). Comprising higher ground with no major drainage problems, this area attracted comparably wealthier residents (Malone 2003, 1). These transformations were also compounded by the construction of impressively detailed shops along Chapel Street, solidifying the strip as a popular retail and commercial centre by the late nineteenth century (Allom Lovell 2000, 45).

Pockets of the suburb continued to be used as a centre for small-scale manufacturing into the early- and mid-twentieth centuries. Although business restructuring and trade liberalisation in the late twentieth century ultimately resulted in the closure and demolition of many of these factories, built remnants of this era can be seen at the c.1910 Former Kia-ora Cordial factory chimney at 181-187 High Street, Prahran and at the former milliner factory at Grattan Street, Prahran (Context Pty Ltd 2009, 95). Today, Prahran's working-class history is best represented through the relatively modest late nineteenth and early twentieth century single fronted cottages and dwellings that dominate the suburb's building stock. Meanwhile, traces of late nineteenth century middle-class residential development are best seen in the grand Victorian dwellings adjacent to Armadale along Grandview Grove.

- ## Place History

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Moreton Bay Fig Tree (*Ficus macrophylla*) was widely planted as a specimen tree in large gardens and parks and along avenues around Victoria. Described by Baron von Mueller, the Director of Melbourne's Botanic Gardens (1857-73) as 'the grandest of Australian avenue trees', the Moreton Bay Fig Tree was well-regarded by colonial settlers for its suitability to coastal environments and capacity to grow to impressive sizes (Hubbard and Looker 1991; Australian Town and Country Journal 1879, 30).

The land on which the Moreton Bay Fig Tree sits formerly comprised Lot 54 during the 1849-50 Crown Land Sales (Surveyor-General's Department 1849). First purchased by Robert William Pohlman, this allotment consisted of roughly thirty acres of land bounded by present day High Street, Williams Road, and the lines of Mitchie Mews and Fern Avenue (Surveyor-General's Department 1849; Malone 2003, 22). Composed of fairly level land without large drainage problems, the allotment was considered prime residential and commercial land, and the portion

was subsequently subdivided and cleared of timber shortly after 1849. By 1856, there was a scattering of modestly scaled buildings within the former allotment, with the most noted being Mount Erica Hotel. Meanwhile, the subject site comprised a building likely associated with the adjacent Mount Erica Hotel (Surveyor-General's Department 1856) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. 1856 map showing approximate location of the Moreton Bay Fig Tree (then partially occupied by a building) in red and surrounds. *Source:* Public Record Office Victoria.

Over the next few decades, the subject site and surrounds were gradually subdivided to form a nest of small streets, one of which included Russell Street. More intense development took place during the 1880s land boom, which saw the development of substantial two-storey Victorian Italianate residences on and south of the subject site (Malone 2003, 30; MMBW 1899). The scale of these houses reflected the wealthier character of this pocket of Williams Road as compared to the southern end of the road near Gooch Street, which featured modest villas. As depicted in the MMBW detail plan 1004, the residence Carrawa was established at 80 Williams Road, and its rear garden encompassed the site of the Moreton Bay Fig Tree presently listed as 2-6 and 6A Russell Street, Prahran (MMBW 1899) (see Figure 2).

The establishment of private gardens on substantial residential grounds was common amongst the municipality's wealthy, ultimately contributing towards the area's reputation as one of Melbourne's most pleasant leafy suburbs (Context Pty Ltd 2009, 149). While its leafy character would later be enhanced by Council street planting programs in the municipality's east (present day Armadale and Malvern) during the early twentieth century and interwar period, mature remnant trees from old Victorian estates and residential gardens have also played a major part (Context Pty Ltd 2009, 149). This is particularly the case for the suburbs of Prahran and Windsor, which were not subject to Council street planting program due to its narrower streets (Wilde 1993, 33). Consequently, surviving mature trees in this area of the municipality typically stem from private residential gardens dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

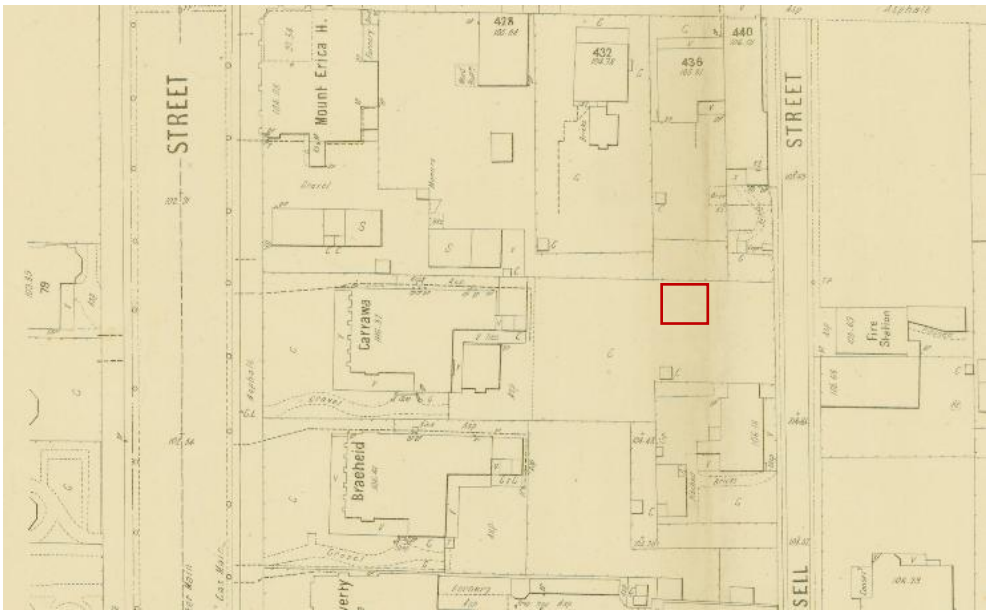


Figure 2. 1899 MMBW detail plan. 1004 showing the site of the Moreton Bay Fig Tree (then part of the rear garden of Carrawa) in red. *Source*: State Library of Victoria.

The Moreton Bay Fig Tree appears to have been planted shortly after the establishment of Carrawa in the late 1880s. Indeed, by 1930s, the tree was already of an impressive size and formed a prominent feature at the corner of High Street and Williams Road (Paynting c. 1936) (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. c.1930s view of the intersection of High Street and Williams Road showing Mount Erica Hotel and the already well-established Moreton Bay Fig Tree in the background. *Source:* State Library of Victoria.

The Moreton Bay Fig Tree continued to form part of the rear garden of Carrawa until the early 2000s, when the garden was subdivided and re-developed with the present-day contemporary dwelling at 2-6 Russell Street, Prahran. While the tree's surrounding landscape has changed

substantially, it nevertheless continues to remain in situ. Meanwhile, although situated on a smaller allotment, Carrawa remains extant.



Figure 4. 1981 aerial showing the Moreton Bay Fig Tree (then still part of the rear garden of Carrawa at 80 Williams Road), in red. *Source:* Historical Aerial Photography - Foundation Spatial Data.

Comparative Analysis

As highlighted earlier, Stonnington's reputation as a pleasant leafy suburb initially stemmed from the establishment of private nineteenth century residential gardens amongst the municipality's wealthy. While this was chiefly concentrated in the large Victorian estates of Toorak, gardens of a suburban scale were also a feature of freestanding villas throughout the upper-middle class pockets of Prahran and Windsor. In these pockets, private gardens were an expression of the suburban ideal of *ruse in urbe* (country in the city), which typically meant a freestanding house surrounded by its own garden (Davison 1978, 145; Context Pty Ltd 2020, 128). Owing to its spreading evergreen canopies and visual resemblance to English trees used in British gardens, the Moreton Bay Fig Tree became one of the signature ornamental trees that was used in the formative years of private gardens in colonial Victoria.

While most of these private gardens are no longer extant, a handful of mature trees associated with them have survived and are therefore comparable to the Moreton Bay Fig Tree at part of 2-6; 6A, 8 Russell Street, 420, 436-438, 440 High Street and 80 Williams Road. However, as there are currently no trees included in their own right within the Heritage Overlay in the City of Stonnington, these trees are either protected under the municipality's General Local Law, or under tree controls within a larger heritage place. They include:

- **Moreton Bay Fig Tree, Lauriston Girls School ('significant' under General Local Law).** This Moreton Bay Fig Tree is not only comparable in terms of species, but also as a mature tree planting associated with the private gardens and/or grounds of a nineteenth century residential estate. Existing research suggests that this Moreton Bay Fig Tree was associated with the private grounds of the former nineteenth century Brocklesby Estate, which went on to become Lauriston Girls School in 1907. As with the subject Moreton Bay Fig Tree, it is

similarly noted for its age, size, height, and canopy spread. However, due to it siting within a school, it is not visible from the public domain.

- **Bella sombra, Trelowarren House, 543 Orrong Road, Armadale ('significant' under General Local Law).** Native to South America, the Bella sombra (*Phytolacca dioica*) at Trelowarren comprises a mature example of an unusual species. It forms a significant feature in the landscape, and is located north of the 1870s Trelowarren House at 543 Orrong Road, Armadale. As with the Moreton Bay Fig Tree, the tree dates to the Victorian era and is associated with the gardens of Trelowarren House. While it compares as an impressively sized ornamental planting that can be traced back to the early private gardens of the Stonnington municipality, it differs in terms of species.
- **English Elm, corner of Glenferrie Road and Sorrett Avenue, Malvern (tree controls within HO396 Sorrett Avenue Precinct).** Estimated at 140 years in age, the English Elm at the corner of Glenferrie Road and Sorrett Avenue, originally one of a pair, formerly parked the original entrance to the Sorrett Estate. It was planted in 1859 and is considered a landmark in the area. While more impressive than the Moreton Bay Fig Tree in terms of longevity and association with the former Sorrett Garden (now demolished), it nevertheless draws similarities as a surviving mature tree associated with a nineteenth century private garden. As with the Bella sombra (*Phytolacca dioica*) at Trelowarren House, it comprises an introduced as opposed to a native species.

Other comparable Moreton Bay Fig Trees within the municipality are associated with the private gardens of non-residential properties. As with the above examples, they are not included in their own right within the Heritage Overlay in the City of Stonnington, and are consequently either protected under the municipality's General Local Law or under tree controls within a larger heritage place. They include:

- **Moreton Bay Fig Tree, Presentation Convent, 187 Dandenong Road, Windsor ('significant' under General Local Law).** Approximately 150 years old, this example compares to the subject Moreton Bay Fig Tree in terms of scale and age. It similarly demonstrates the use of this species during the formative years of gardens in Victoria. However, as opposed to an association with a residential garden, this Moreton Bay Fig Tree is linked to the early development of Presentation Convent, and by extension, the passing of the Education Act in 1872 and subsequent expansion of religious education in the municipality.
- **Moreton Bay Fig Tree, Argo Reserve, Argo Street, Prahran ('significant' under General Local Law).** Noted for its size, age and contribution to the landscape, this specimen compares to the subject Moreton Bay Fig Tree in terms of scale and longevity. It is associated with the gardens of the Elizabeth Fry Retreat (now demolished), a refuge and training centre for female ex-prisoners that was housed in a converted in a nineteenth century villa.

While the Moreton Bay Fig Tree at part of 2-6; 6A, 8 Russell Street, 420, 436-438, 440 High Street and 80 Williams Road is not the only example of its type, nor is it the only surviving tree associated with a nineteenth century garden, it nevertheless displays outstanding qualities in terms of height, canopy spread and maturity, and shares a clear association with the extant Victorian villa at 80 Williams Road, Prahran. It forms one of the few remaining mature Moreton Bay Fig Trees in the municipality associated with a nineteenth century garden, and according to

the 1991 study conducted by Timothy Hubbard Pty Ltd, it also comprises the largest Moreton Bay Fig Tree in the former City of Prahran.

Moreover, as opposed to the Moreton Bay Fig Tree examples noted above, the subject Moreton Bay Fig Tree also makes a substantial contribution to the public landscape, particularly due to its prominent siting at the intersection of two major thoroughfares. As such, although the Moreton Bay Fig Tree is currently protected under General Local Law, there are substantial grounds to also include it as an individually listed item on the Heritage Overlay, which would allow for its qualities to be managed from a heritage perspective. Such an approach has been demonstrated in municipalities elsewhere, as is the case with the Moreton Bay Fig at 38-42 Brighton Road, St Kilda (Port Phillip. HO371) and the Moreton Bay Fig trees in the Mitchell Street reserve in Bendigo (Greater Bendigo, HO189).

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Limitations

1. Access to all heritage places was limited to a visual inspection from the public domain. The interiors of buildings and inaccessible areas such as rear gardens were not accessed as part of this heritage study.
2. Condition and site modification assessment was limited to a visual inspection undertaken from the public domain as well as desktop resources.
3. The historical notes provided for this citation are not considered to be an exhaustive history of the site.

Images



Overview of Moreton Bay. *Source*: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2023.



Closeup view of the base of Moreton Bay Fig Tree within the carpark of 2-6 and 6A Russell Street. *Source*: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2023.



View of the Moreton Bay Fig Tree from Russell Street. *Source*: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2023.



View of the Moreton Bay Fig Tree from the rear carpark. *Source*: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2023.



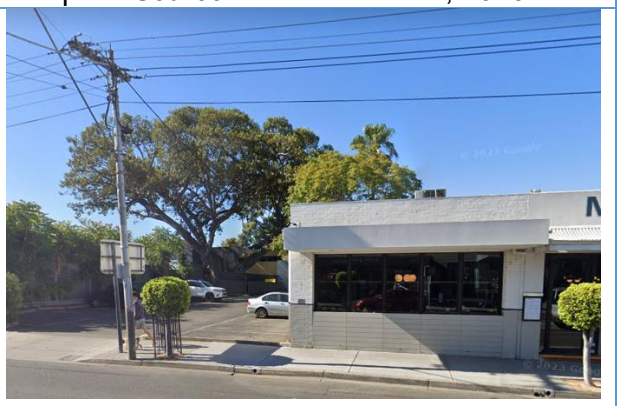
Closeup view of the branches from the rear carpark. *Source*: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2023.



Closeup view of Moreton Bay Fig Tree and encircling garden bed within the townhouse complex. *Source*: Realestate.com, 2010.



View of Moreton Bay Fig Tree from corner of Williams Road and High Street. *Source*: Google Streetview, 2022.



View of Moreton Bay Fig Tree from High Street. *Source*: Google Streetview, 2022.

Authors

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