

## MAGISTRATES COURT

262-280 Victoria Square

The Magistrates Court, formerly the Supreme Court of South Australia, is one of the original buildings facing Victoria Square and one of the oldest public buildings in Adelaide. It was constructed as South Australia's first Supreme Court, criminal sessions before then having been held at a variety of temporary and unsatisfactory premises including the New Queen's Theatre in Gilles Arcade (see Royal Victoria/Queens Theatre).

Tenders for a supreme courthouse were called in 1847 and a design was prepared by the colonial engineer, Edward Charles Frome, or, more likely, his successor, Richard Lambeth. R.G. Bowen's tender was accepted and work started late in 1847. The contractor soon encountered difficulties and delays due to deviations from the original design and the problem of obtaining sufficient number of large blocks of stone at that early date in the settlement's history. Bowen asked to substitute stuccoed brickwork but he was held to his contract, and, it appears, obtained the stone from several quarries including one at Beaumont which was opened in about 1838. Other building stones which may have contributed to the impressive facade include Mitcham, Finnis River or Stirling sandstones.



The contractor's problems did not end there. By mid-1850 when the building was nearly complete, the government's lease on the Queen's Theatre expired and officials forcibly occupied the unfinished courthouse. There was public outrage at this act of official burglary. The *South Australian Gazette and Mining Journal* of 4 July 1850 stormed:

*Things are really coming to a pretty pass amongst us, when under the express sanction of the government a most daring and unwarrantable outrage upon the local rights of the subject is perpetuated by those whose business and duty it is to uphold the supremacy of the law at all hazards and under every provocation . . . An attempt is made to thrust the poor government officials into unfinished, damp and half-painted rooms, and when the contractor legally resists the intrusion until guaranteed against consequences which might lead to ruin to himself, the windows are smashed, the doors broken open, that justice might be duly installed, and a lesson of public order and respect for the law read to the citizens!*

The criticism would seem well-founded; but the judges Cooper and Crawford, took up residence. The chief justice's weak voice was at once cause for further complaint this time about the new facilities. The *Adelaide Times*, 13 July 1850 observed, 'The vast height of the hall, the large globular skylight that surmounts it, and the extensive subterranean vault leading to the dock, seem all combined to deprive the voice of any speaker of any particle of distinctiveness'. For his part, the 'Second judge' (Crawford) criticised the placing of the

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Bench, the lack of jury rooms, toilets, robing rooms and the smoking fireplaces in the judges chambers.

These problems were rectified and the building was properly completed in 1851. However, it was never completed to the satisfaction of their lordships who increased in number to three by 1859. Several changes were made in response to their complaints, including the construction of a public gallery (which is still in place), although the structure was externally unchanged.

In appearance the Supreme Court was at that time one of the most impressive and substantial public buildings in Adelaide, dominating the surrounding partly vacant town acres and an empty treeless Victoria Square. In August 1851 the ceremonial first session opening of South



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Australia's first Legislative Council was held at the new court rather than in its own confined Council Chamber.

The judges themselves remained dissatisfied. They asked to be transferred to the new Local and Insolvency Courts' building across King William Street (see Supreme Court), and the roles of the two buildings were swapped in 1873. The new building, also facing Victoria Square, has been the Supreme Court ever since.

In 1891 the Local and Insolvency Courts changed places with the Police Court, which was behind the new Supreme Court building (see Local Court, King William Street). The original Supreme Court was adapted to become a 'City Watch House and Police Court combined', later renamed the Magistrates Court.

Some idea of the social and legal changes of the twentieth century which brought expansion in police responsibilities, and other court functions such as the Licensing Court, may be seen in the fabric of the building itself. Between the 1920s and the 1960s major changes almost completely altered the interior, while additions more than trebled its size. In 1921 the large central section of the present building complex was attached to the rear of the original building. The two storey extension included accommodation for the state's newly appointed women police. In 1933-34 a further large extension was the three storey section with an entrance to King William Street. Both extensions were designed by the Architect-in-Chief's Department, then under the direction of Alfred Edward Simpson who was appointed in 1920. In the 1950s a two storey shop abutting the 1934 section, dating from, about 1900, was bought and adapted for courts use.

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Both the exterior and the interior fittings and furnishings of the 1920s and 1930s sections are largely original, but very little remains of the 1850 building. The most significant feature is the original court room with its skylight, canopy and public gallery (since enclosed). Externally the old court building still presents an imposing facade to Victoria Square with its fluted Doric columns and distinctive yellowed sandstone. As the oldest and one of the state's four most important court buildings, all of which face on to Victoria Square or nearby King William Street, the Magistrates Court forms a crucial part of the law courts' precinct and also stands as an important streetscape element in its own right.



(CD Ref 3971/80)

ACA, Smith Survey 1880; *Adelaide Times*, 13 July 1850; MLSA, Historical photographs (Town Acre 409); RN 39, RN 42; Marsden, S., 'History of the development of the Magistrates

Court building' in Danvers Architects, *The Magistrates Court building conservation study*, 1986; Morgan, E.J.R., & Gilbert, S.H., *Early Adelaide architecture 1836 to 1886*, 1969, p. 65; *Observer*, 29 June 1850; PRO, GRG 38; *South Australian Gazette and Mining journal*, 4 July 1850, 6 July 1850, 28 September 1850; *South Australian Government Gazette*, August 1851, p. 549; *South Australian Register*, 13 April 1839, 16 September 1839, 30 September 1843, 27 September 1847.

The text in this Information Sheet was copied from the **Heritage of the City of Adelaide: An Illustrated Guide**, (1996). The photographs contained in this Information Sheet are a selection of those held by Heritage Services, in digital format.

The property described in this Information Sheet is included in the Register of State Heritage places. A heritage listing does not mean or imply right of access by the public to such properties.

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*The heritage related Principles of Development Control as well as the Precinct specific objectives and Principles of Development Control are contained in the Adelaide (City) Development Plan. These should be referred to in whole when contemplating any development.*

*Further information on the Heritage Incentives Scheme, an initiative of Council to sponsor timely and appropriate conservation action is available upon request of the Customer Service Centre.*

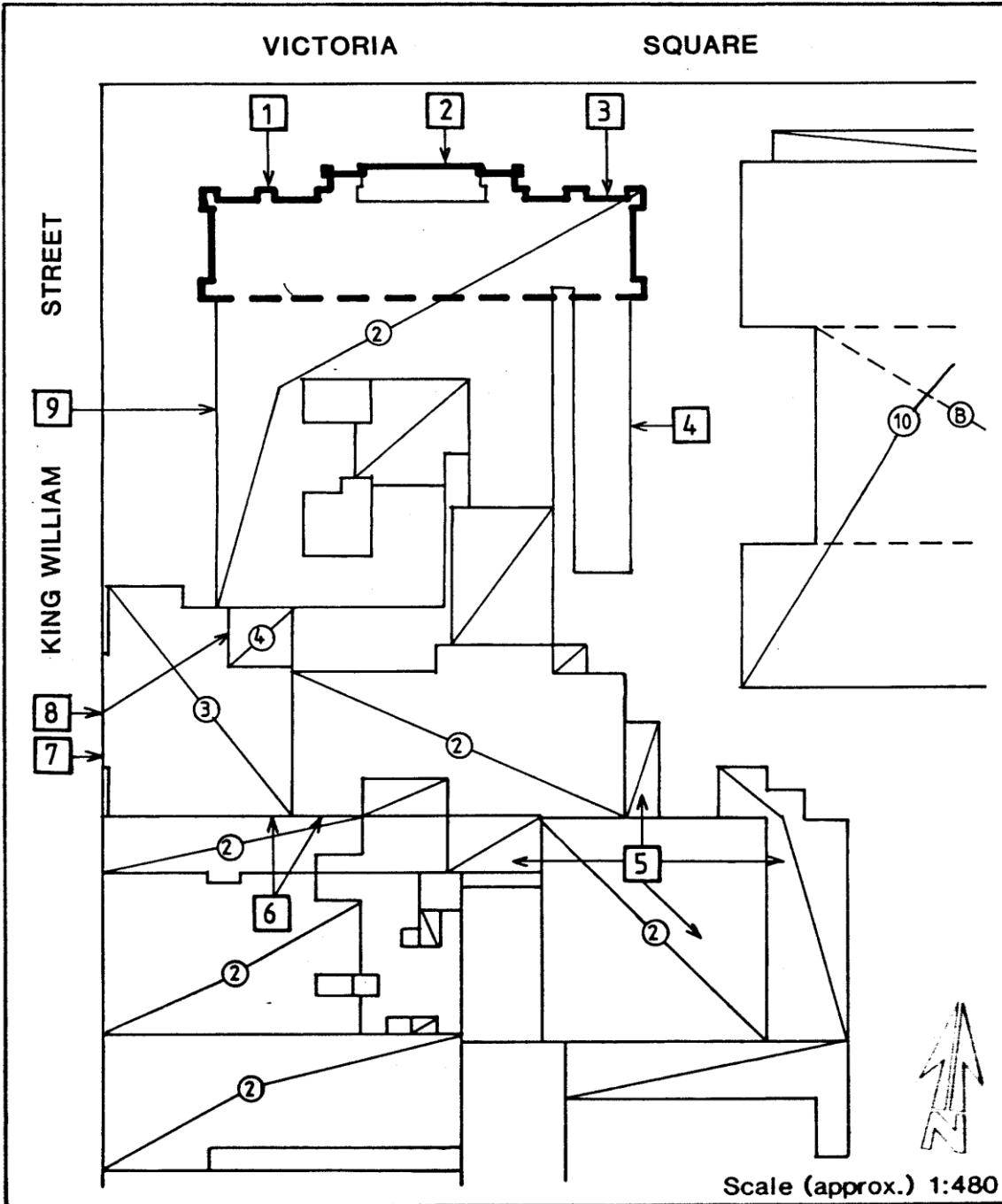


# CITY OF ADELAIDE HERITAGE STUDY

## The City Heritage Register-Definition of Items

Prepared by the Dept. of Planning and Development

Item	MAGISTRATE'S COURT	Building No	16/0101-1
Address	262-280 Victoria Square; 282-300 King William Street	NUA	0409/1



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#### NOTES:

1. Ashlar sandstone facade with rendered plinth.
2. Portico with Doric columns.
3. Closed in window.
4. Rendered.
5. Cream brick additions.
6. Red brick (English Bond).
7. Rendered walling.
8. "Art Deco" detailing.
9. Rendered.