

AYERS HOUSE

287-300 North Terrace

Ayers House is an imposing landmark on eastern North Terrace. A gracious bluestone mansion, it is the last of its kind on the terrace, apart from Government House. The house is named after its most famous resident, Sir Henry Ayers, KCMG, who was a pre-eminent public figure in colonial South Australian life.

Ayers came to South Australia in 1840 soon after the colony was founded. He worked at first as a law clerk then moved into financial circles. He was secretary, then managing director of the South Australian Mining Association of Burra, and chairman or director of several banks. Ayers enjoyed a political career spanning almost forty years. He was a member of the Legislative Council from 1857 until 1893, and was premier and chief secretary several times during the 1860s and 1870s. Ayers' home was the venue for significant social functions connected with his public life, including some renowned parties and two balls each year.

Ayers daughter, Lucy Josephine Bagot, well remembered those social events:

The Ball Room had folding doors of solid cedar, and other similar doors allowed four rooms to be made into one, so that there was ample space. The floor of the Ball Room was also of cedar and had such a wonderful spring in it that I would not have blamed all the parsons in Adelaide if they had danced on it every Sunday night. Before dances were given the whole floor was washed with milk, which gave it a smooth surface.

The origins of the house date from about 1846 when it was first built of brick. Ayers transformed the premises into an elegant bluestone mansion with its circular fronted rooms and Kingston style porticoes.

The first record of the original house appeared in the Corporation of the City of Adelaide's first rate assessment book for 1846. This record mentions a brick dwelling with a well on the western half of Town Acre 30 which had been purchased by Robert Thornber on 15 March 1845.

Thornber appears to have built the house then sold the property to William Paxton on 21 August 1846. Paxton extended the house during his occupation. The assessment book of 1849 recorded that additions were being made to the five roomed dwelling. By January 1852 it was described as a nine roomed brick house with veranda, domestic offices, stables and coach house with 2 3/4 acres enclosed as garden and paddocks. Its assessed rateable value had risen from £63 (in 1848) to £270.

Henry Ayers moved into the house through an informal agreement on 13 July 1855, officially leasing the property from Paxton from 15 July 1861. The two men seem to have reached an agreement that Paxton would pay for the improvements which Ayers decided upon, and Ayers at once embarked upon extensive additions and alterations. In his diary for January 1858 Ayers wrote, ' . . . commenced addition of Library and Bedrooms to House, North Terrace'. The basements were probably also constructed then.

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In August 1859 Ayers ' . . . commenced extensive alterations and additions to House', including a large drawing-room, with other rooms, to the eastward. The *South Australian Register* of 19 November 1859 mentioned that Mr Farr was carrying out these works. Ayers House then began to take on its present form with bluestone additions entirely shrouding the original brick house.

Ayers finally bought the property, house and the whole of Town Acre 30 on 13 June 1871. Still not content with the size of his mansion he engaged the architect George Strickland Kingston to design and oversee the construction of a coach house and stables and further additions to the residence. An upper floor with bedrooms was added. The western bow fronted dining-room was also built to complement the eastern wing. The coach house and stables were of the same material and grand proportions as the mansion.

Gavin Walkley described the architectural merits of the final mansion:

The rooms, particularly those for entertaining, are of fine, generous proportions, suitable to the status of the owner. There is a Georgian elegance in the semi-circular fronts to the east and west wings, but the heavy almost crude porches are in marked contrast. Mouldings and other architectural details reveal Kingston's lack of basic training. But the building as a whole commands respect by reason of its honesty of construction in massive bluestone and for the distinguished part it played in the Colonial Adelaide scene.



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Ayers died in 1897 and the house was vacant until about 1918. In 1901 the Duke of York's entourage stayed there briefly during the visit to Australia for the federation celebrations. The Governor's wife Lady Audrey Tennyson described this as a beautiful house, the best 'in Adelaide', conveniently close to Government House. A charge of £100 was paid for the

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week's use, but she said everybody was angry at the charge as the several owners 'under trustees would each get only a small amount and they were all rich. She wrote:

The old grandfather, Sir Henry Ayers, who left it to be sold among his children, dropt all his h's and left £700,000 to be divided, so they might have given it for the week. It has been empty 4 years ever since his death . . .

Between 1918 and 1926 the property was used variously for the rehabilitation of returned service men, and as offices and clubrooms by the Returned Servicemen's League. The western 'paddock' was let to the promoters of a dance hall, the 'Palais de Dance' or 'Palais Royal'.

The government bought the mansion in 1926 and it was used to accommodate Royal Adelaide Hospital nurses. In 1972-73 the government renovated and redeveloped the property as headquarters of the National Trust of South Australia and as a restaurant complex. Five rooms in the mansion were converted into an elegant formal restaurant known as Henry Ayers Restaurant. The stables, coach house and harness room became a bistro originally called Paxton's Restaurant, but changed in 1985 to The Conservatory, following the construction of a sympathetic conservatory addition by Danvers Architects.

ACA, Assessments; Brown, J.M., 'Ayers House' in *Historic houses of Australia*, Australian Council of National Trusts, Vol. 1, 1977, p. 284-9; Hasluck, A. (ed), *Audrey Tennyson's vice-regal days*, 1978, p. 144; MILSA, Historical photographs (Town Acre 30); *South Australian Register*, 19 November 1859, 28 September 1874, 18 January 1875; Walkley, G., *Ayers House*, 1981.

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.

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	AYER'S HOUSE	Building No	4/0205
Address	287-300 North Terrace	CT	1576/45

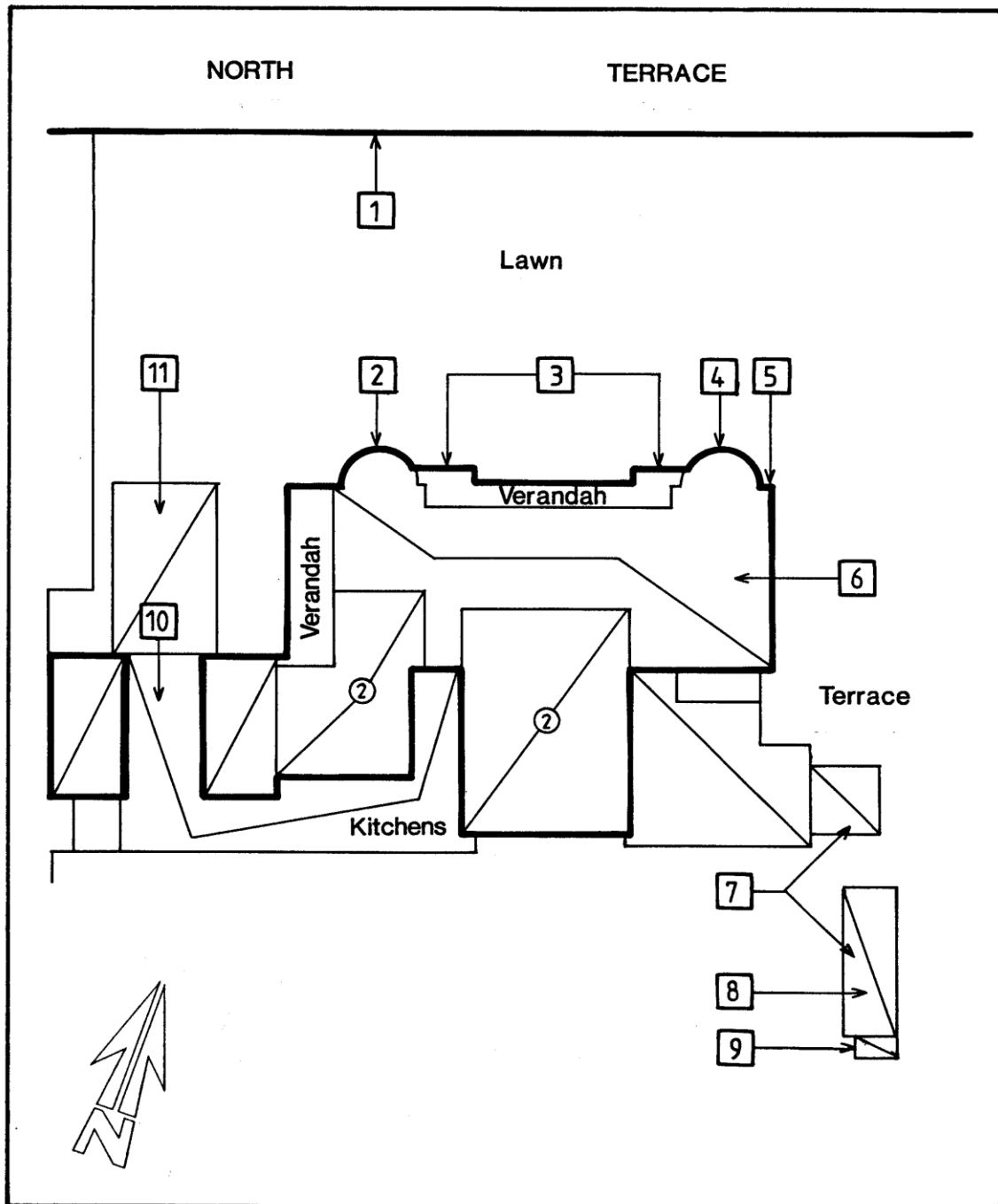


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NOTES:

1. Freestone Wall.
2. Bow Window.
3. Rendered Porticos.
4. Bow Window.
5. Bluestone Rubble with Stucco Enrichment.
6. Slate Roof.
7. Sympathetic Bluestone Additions.
8. Offices.
9. Store.
10. Old Stables.
11. New Dining Area.