

BIRKS' BUILDING - OFFICE AND SHOP

57 Rundle Mall

Birks' Chemist was once part of the family business of Charles Birks and Company Limited which began in 1864, as a small enterprise in a building located on Town Acre 51 in Hindley Street.

Its founder, Charles Birks emigrated to South Australia in 1853. In 1871 Birks' business moved to Rundle Street, to a site currently occupied by David Jones. In the 1880s Birks' offered stationery and fancy goods for sale.

Other family members leased the site opposite, on the south western corner of Gawler Place and Rundle Street. New shops had been constructed on that site by the owner in 1871. The Birks' family shop on this site was operated by GD and WH Birks opened as a "homeopathic chemist". The chemist sold all manner of goods, from "insect destroyer", domestic medicine cases and chests, "homeopathic guide books" to horse and cattle medicine. Birks' also made their own medicines including "Birks' Tincture of Podphyllum" to remedy maladies resulting from "a sluggish liver". Two other tenancies were also opened in the building.



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The Birks' business interests grew and by 1889 Birks' had five shops including Birks' Chemist. By 1934, the company had 600 employees. It is of interest that Charles Birks' brother, George Napier Birks, who operated the chemist shop on Rundle Street for almost three years during the 1890s, became a member of the group of dissatisfied Australians who set sail for Paraguay in search of 'Utopia' in September 1895.

Birks' son, Napier Kyffin Birks, joined the family business in 1893. He became the managing director in 1908 and was responsible for the Company's successful development after 1918. Overseas trips to America and England enabled him to implement the latest ideas for improvement to the retail trade.

In 1922, the three tenants of the building at the corner of Rundle Street and Gawler Place; Birks' Chemists, C.L. Young Shoe Company and Allans purchased the building. Charles Birks died in 1924, and Napier decided to rebuild the Rundle Street site as a six storey

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building. The other two tenants agreed and the demolition of the 1871 building followed. Each constructed their own independently designed building. The bow fronted and distinctive Young's Shoe Shop and the Allans building were constructed. In 1925 the Birks' building on the corner was completed. In addition, the Oriental Hotel, on the opposite corner of Gawler Place, and now known as the Walsh Building was rebuilt.

The name of Birks was a household name in South Australia for many years. In 1980, the pharmaceutical side was purchased by one of the Company's employees, who had begun as an apprentice pharmacist in the Birks' business in 1955. At the time of purchase, the new owner, Geoff Pride stated,

Birks' Chemists have always had a traditional approach to pharmacy and after 125 years I would be foolish to alter what has been a successful pharmacy. I want to see all the traditions of this company maintained.

The chemist shop and office building was designed by the large architectural practice of McMichael and Harris in 1925. It is a dignified and simple design, and makes use of restrained Classically derived decorative elements.

The building, the subject of this nomination, is of six storeys in height and is relatively narrow in its frontage to Rundle Mall but extends in a southerly direction for a considerable distance. It is used as a shop on the ground floor with offices above. It is faced with rendered masonry. The Rundle Mall facade of the building is divided into two bays and features simple window surrounds with keystones. The first floor window surrounds are more elaborately treated than those of the upper four floors. The decoration to the building consists of stylised rendered wreaths. A pair of pilasters mark the angles of the building and extend from the first floor level to just below the cornice line of the building. The ground floor of the building has been extensively altered.

Stripped Classical decoration is applied to the facades and most noticeably at the most southerly point of the building where the entrance to the offices is located. There is a small doorway with a pediment leading to a lobby with lifts and stairwell. The lift is surrounded by the staircase in typical fashion. The offices on the upper floors have been altered with for example, the lowering of ceilings and the introduction of modern services due to the changing requirements of tenants and the rentals able to be charged.

The mid to late 1920s saw dramatic changes along Rundle Street with many of the nineteenth century shops being rebuilt. The cluster of these buildings epitomises this mid 1920s redevelopment in Rundle Street.

All four buildings, Birks' Chemists, Young's Shoe Shop, the Allens building and the former Oriental Hotel now form a cluster of buildings designed and constructed in the 1920s. All four buildings are characteristic of the architecture of that period and they constitute a notable physical environment.

Rate Assessment Books for the period 1870 to 1873; *Advertiser*, 17 May, 1934, p. 17e; *Advertiser*, 24 June 1980; Page, Ml *Sculptors In Space*; *South Australian Architects 1836-1986*, The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (SA Chapter), Adelaide, 1986, p. 151;

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Statton, J. (ed), *Biographical Index of South Australians; 1836-1885*, South Australian Genealogy and Heraldry Society Incorporated, Adelaide, 1986, Vol. 1, p.126; *AO Chambers' (Common Sense) Information for the People*, 1885, available at the Mortlock Library of South Australianiana

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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.