

Werribee Park Mansion

The Chirnside Family's legacy

The exquisite 60-room Italianate Mansion built at Werribee Park from 1874 to 1877 was a testament to the successful partnership between Scottish squatters Thomas and Andrew Chirnside. The pioneering brothers were a driving force behind early settlement in this region, which evolved from humble beginnings.

Building an empire

Thomas Chirnside left his homeland of Scotland in 1838 with a few hundred pounds in his pocket, a Bible, and dreams of a new life in an emerging country. Boundless opportunities were available in a developing agricultural industry, and as an enterprising individual, Thomas invested largely in stock and land. His younger brother Andrew joined his bold venture in 1841, and together, the brothers set about building a lucrative pastoral empire.

Unrequited love

With the business progressing well, Thomas returned to Scotland for a visit in 1845. He remained for a couple of years, during which time he fell in love with his first cousin Mary Begbie and asked for her hand in marriage. Her parents did not approve, and he ventured back to Australia alone.

With Thomas safely back, Andrew finalised plans for his first trip home.

But before leaving, his older brother asked for a favour: to bring Mary back to Australia in any way he could. Andrew returned in 1852, accompanied by Mary as his wife. Thomas never married.

The pinnacle

Thomas wanted Mary to reside in a home of stature and serenity unrivalled in Victoria. In conjunction with Andrew, he set about building an elaborate 60-room Italianate-style Mansion at their Werribee Park property. The residence was also an opportunity to showcase their successful venture to the world. Using the finest materials and expertise, the Mansion was built in three years in the 1870s for Andrew and Mary Chirnside and their three youngest children. Thomas took permanent residency at his nearby property in Point Cook until his last few years, where he joined Andrew and Mary in the elaborate Mansion at Werribee Park.

The demise

As society developed in Australia, new laws and taxes were introduced. The successful empire created by the Chirnside brothers required savvy management and attention to stay viable.

Thomas and Andrew passed away within three years of each other, in 1887 and 1890, respectively.

OFFICIAL

Andrew left Werribee Park to his two youngest sons George and John Percy with a proviso that Mary maintained residency in the Mansion for her remaining days. The sons subsequently divided the property with George overseeing the Mansion and surrounding land.

Tragically, Mary died from a terrible accident in 1908. Her hair caught alight from a bedside candle, and tragically, she did not recover.

George diversified from the pastoral industry, leasing areas of land to agricultural farmers while managing his own stock of pigs and Jersey cattle. Unfortunately, in the changing business climate, he was unable to return the kind of profits enjoyed by his forbearers.

Chirnside's ownership of Werribee Park ended in 1922. Initially purchased by Philip Lock, a self-made wealthy grazier from Warrnambool, it was sold again a year later to the Roman Catholic Bishops of Australia for development as a seminary.

The seminary, a training ground for young men seeking to enter the priesthood in the Dioceses of Melbourne, Ballarat, Sandhurst, Sale and Hobart operated at Werribee Park for the next fifty years.

During its occupation of Werribee Park, the Catholic Church added several wings to the original Chirnside Mansion, two of which have now been converted into the Mansion Hotel & Spa.

A return to past glory

The Victorian Government acquired Werribee Park from the Catholic Church in 1973 and commenced work to restore the Mansion progressively and the remaining 400 hectares of land to its former glory. Now proudly managed by Parks Victoria, the park offers visitors a rich array of history, culture, and stories to explore.

Take a look at the Conservation Exhibition located on the first floor, at the far end of the bachelor's wing. This display details the immense restoration project undertaken by the Victorian Government over many years.

Visit the hologram, May, in the Laundry, an enthusiastic maid with a wealth of knowledge to share.

Take a stroll to the Farm area, in contrast to the elaborate craftsmanship of the Chirnside Mansion.



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