

# Gawler Church Hill State Heritage Area

Gawler Church Hill was declared a State Heritage Area on 6 June 1985.

## CHARACTER

The Church Hill state heritage area is located in the centre of Colonel Light's plan for Gawler, and as such received special attention in his design. The precinct is now bypassed by traffic and commerce and is the only residential area in Gawler to retain its nineteenth century atmosphere.

Church Hill has a distinctive character, largely associated with its location on a natural spur of land rising 10m above the surrounding river flats. In the original town plan, this natural dominance became the topographical and planning 'axis' of Colonel Light's triangular design for Gawler. The area was to be a residential one, with three central reserves along Cowan Street, on which would be sited the three most dominant churches. As well as the church buildings, Church Hill was identified as the site for the police station and courthouse, giving the area a heightened sense of purpose.

Today the main thoroughfare, Cowan Street, is a wide tree-lined street linking the three original squares - Light Square, Orleana Square and Parnell Square. These open spaces contribute significantly to Church Hill's character, providing distant views of the streetscape and major buildings. Sections of stone kerbing and guttering have been maintained and are subtle features of the area's 19th century appeal.

Residences are single family dwellings. While individual designs and ages vary, from early Victorian cottages to Federation bungalows, they all have a common form, size and use of building materials that creates a sense of continuity, and contributes to the uniform feel of the area.

Although much of Light's original plan is still evident, some aspects of the design have been significantly altered by time. The most obvious of these changes has been the closure of the small street behind the Catholic Church. This land has been incorporated into the primary school grounds, with the result that Parnell Square has lost its identity as a square in its own right. The Church Hill area now has only one major entry point, Cowan Street via Light Square, so there is little or no through-traffic.

## FEATURES

Light's plan for the Church Hill area of Gawler deviated from the town's grid pattern to accommodate the 10m rise of the land. He designed a wide, central street (Cowan Street) linking three open squares reserved for the three dominant churches. Adjacent streets and housing allotments related to this main thoroughfare and to the hill's topography.

The most obvious landscape features in the state heritage area are the squares. Originally Cowan Street linked three squares - Light, Orleana and Parnell - but the road behind Parnell Square has now been closed, leaving only two distinct squares in the precinct. The central square, Orleana Square, was named after the vessel on which Henry Dundas Murray and John Reid (pioneer settlers and instigators of the Gawler Special Survey) arrived in South Australia in January 1839. On the original plan, Light Square was to be the site for a Church of Scotland but, as this was not built, the square remains an open space.

As its name suggests, the dominant built features of Church Hill are its churches and associated buildings. The two most obvious landmarks are undoubtedly the St Peter and St Paul's Roman Catholic Church, in what was Parnell Square, and St George's Anglican Church in Orleana Square. Other churches in the precinct include the Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (1921) in Finnis Street, the former Congregational Church (1861), now Baptist Church, in Moore Street and the former Presbyterian Church (1855-56) in Cowan Street.

Church Hill is primarily a residential area, retaining a colonial character with early Victorian cottages, villas and Federation Bungalows. Other significant buildings within the state heritage area include the 1881 Court House and the Old Bushman Inn, which is a state heritage-listed place.

The Gawler Primary School is interesting in that it is both in, and adjacent to, the state heritage area. The original 1878 school buildings and grounds are outside the Area's boundary. This complex is also a state-heritage listed - its significance relating to



the school's history, as one of the first group of Model Schools in South Australia. The stone boundary wall of this early school originally formed the eastern boundary of the state heritage area, but has recently been demolished so that modern offices and facilities could be provided for the school.

## HISTORY

The design of Gawler, like Adelaide, owes much to Colonel William Light who, in 1837, proposed a settlement at the convergence of the North and South Para Rivers, as a gateway to the state's north.

The town, named Gawler to honour South Australia's second Governor, Charles Gawler, was a speculative venture by 12 land-holders. It was laid out by William Jacob, to Light's plan, and gazetted as a municipality in January 1839, becoming the state's first established country town. As with the capital (Adelaide) Light designed Gawler with spacious parklands. He also provided open squares for churches and generous reserves for civic and community use.

The new settlement received its initial economic boost during the mid-1840s with discoveries of copper at Kapunda and Burra. Gawler became a lively staging post for the bullock drays carrying smelted ore to Port Adelaide. At the height of the copper boom, more than 100 bullock drays passed through Gawler each day.

This through-traffic was reduced in the 1850s by the development of other transport means - closer ports, the railway and the Murray River trade - but by then Gawler had become established as a commercial centre, with a growing population and its own industry and trades.

Gawler flourished in the 1870s and 1880s, as the town developed into a distribution and market centre for a vast region to the north, northeast and northwest of Adelaide. Entrepreneurs built flour mills to process locally produced grain, a foundry was constructed and other industries established. The township rapidly expanded beyond Light's original vision and plan.

Gawler's manufacturing activities declined in the early 20th century. The closing of local industry, and the onset of the Depression, brought unemployment and wage reductions. New building virtually ceased from 1930. Fortunately trade activities were maintained and the town survived as a residential and commercial centre. The end of World War II brought renewed economic and population growth, and revitalised the local building industry.

## CULTURAL HISTORY

Gawler has a rich cultural history, being dubbed the 'Colonial Athens' during the 1860s. The town's numerous 'claims to fame' include one of the colony's first museums (c1859); the publication of the Colony's first local history in 1860; the formation of The Gawler Humbug Society (1859) and its newspaper *Bunyip* in 1863; and an innovative Institute Committee that sponsored two competitions - one in 1859 for a national song, and another in 1861 for a history of South Australia.

The history prize was awarded to Henry Hussey, whose history was later used by Edwin Hodder in his two volume *History of South Australia*, published in 1893.

The song competition has had a significant impact on generations of South Australians. The winning Song of Australia, with lyrics by English-born Caroline Carleton and music by German-born Carl Linger, was first performed in the Gawler Oddfellows Hall in December 1859. Thirty-five years later (in July 1894) The Education Gazette carried a notice that advised "In order to encourage a feeling of patriotism, the Minister wishes all children to be taught to sing The Song of Australia". This tradition continued in primary schools into the 1960s.

## VISITING

The churches, cottages and character of the Gawler Church Hill state heritage area are best enjoyed on foot, although many visitors opt for a short scenic drive along Cowan Street. Gawler is South Australia's oldest country town and a gateway to the Barossa Valley. The local council actively promotes the area's rich heritage through walking trails, tours, and tourist information.





## Further Information

For further information please contact the State Heritage Unit

Department for Environment, Water and Natural Resources

Telephone (08) 8124 4960

Email [DEWNRHeritage@sa.gov.au](mailto:DEWNRHeritage@sa.gov.au)



**Government of South Australia**  
Department of Environment,  
Water and Natural Resources