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Summerland Mansions 17-27 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda



Summerland House, the residence of Hon. Wm Shiels, M.P., c.1903

Summerland Mansions (boldly embossed on the second floor balustrade), could not be anywhere in Victoria, but St Kilda. It is a type of building that gives St Kilda its unique character: mansion-flats, built in 1920 and 1921 right on the street frontage, with shops at ground level and initially with shared, serviced facilities and sweeping views. It is a type of urbanity, there generally higher rise, which is common in European cities such as London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna or Milan and in Sydney, but rare in Melbourne. St Kilda has long been the place in Melbourne most associated with high density apartment living, particularly in the period after World War I, but these spacious mansion-flats were built for a wealthy clientele. They have mixed use, including street-level shops with welcoming plate-glass windows for the use of residents, locals and tourists.

For the first residents at Summerland its large rooms must have offered a sense of secure privacy, with views across the bay and the gardens. Each flat had a screened porch, fully glazed sleep-out and balcony. Communal spaces such as a large accessible roof-top over the Acland Street section, for recreational, and clothes- drying use and the restaurant/dining

room for residents' use over Fitzroy Street. Flats had maid's and service rooms accessed by their own tradesmen's entrance and stair at the rear.

The accessible roof may have even been influenced by Le Corbusier's Dom-ino system with its accessible roof of 1913-15, which was well-publicised, but it is particularly early example for Australia, even if it resulted from the Council's requirement for 50% open space on a fully built-up site. The restaurant/dining room was directly accessible to all residents from two internal stairs. Diners overlooked Fitzroy Street through large plate-glass windows. This meant the apartments needed only a small kitchenette. Again this anticipated today's expectations, when so many apartments offer small kitchens, in assuming frequent dining-out.

Many Summerland flats still have original design features: airing cupboards in the hall, built-in dressers dividing kitchen and dining room, hatches for milk and bread deliveries, kitchen servery hatches, tiled fireplaces, letterboxes and inset door-mats proclaiming 'Summerland Mansions'. Stair-halls have small-paned glazed screen walls to flats and matching timber panelling and are lit by lantern skylights in the ceilings: distinctly Japanese influences. A feature was large flyscreened balconies for sleep-outs, at the rear of each block. Gradually and haphazardly these were enclosed to create additional bedrooms.

The market for Summerland apartments seems to have been for tenants who would have expected a butler and maid in their own house and continued to expect this level of service in a more urban context.



Summerland Mansions, 2002

Summerland's architectural design presents a strong presence to both Fitzroy and Acland Streets in a sophisticated blend of Stripped Classical, Mediterranean and English Arts and

Crafts influences: a distinct departure from its architect, Christopher A. Cowper's previous well-known Federation style particularly in the Grace Park Estate, Hawthorn, such as at 40 Crystobel Crescent and 62 Riversdale Road, built during 1903-12.

Cowper (1868-1954) was an architect and developer. He was born in Capetown and arrived in Melbourne in 1883. As a teenager he was articled to Evander McIvor, architect of Gothic Revival churches. During the 1895-1906 Depression he left architecture for farming, insurance sales and travel overseas, but development of the important Grace Park Estate, where 33 of his houses have been identified revived his architectural career. There his Queen Anne style houses are distinctive for their Tuscan columns and tall, plate-top chimneys. He was prolific over 1883-1954 in three different practices, including of some cinemas. His offices were in Collins Street.

At Summerland he has given the large façades a domestic character by large hipped, tiled roofs with deep eaves, generous balconies and small Georgian panes in the upper window-sashes.

This site is part of the first block sold in the first Crown Land sale in St Kilda, as early as December 1842: sought-after from those earliest days. The buyer, Lieutenant James Ross Lawrence, RN was captain of the schooner *Lady of St Kilda*, from which the suburb took its name. Captain Lawrence named Acland Street after Sir Thomas Dyke Acland, the ship's owner.

Acland's ship was named for *Lady Grange*. In 1734, it is said that she was imprisoned by her husband for seventeen years on the St Kilda group of islands, the westernmost point of the British Isles, and way beyond the Scottish Outer Hebrides. Only on his death could she be released. Her crime was in remonstrating with him about his schemes to restore the position of Bonnie Prince Charlie. There are seven islands in the group, but Hirta is by far the largest. It has not been continuously inhabited since 1930. *Lady Grange* was probably left on Hirta.

In August 1852, on the first crest of the Gold Rush, the architect George Wharton (c1822-1891) designed a house *Summerland*, for this site for its owner, Robert Bennett. Wharton was an extremely prolific designer of over 360 houses, commercial and religious buildings, between 1848 and his death in 1891, on his own and in three partnerships. His best-known building, bearing no resemblance to that *Summerland*, is the See Yup Temple in Raglan Street, South Melbourne (1866).

The first St Kilda Rate Roll (1857) records Bennett's property on the south-east corner of Acland and Fitzroy Streets of 16 rooms, a coach house and stables. The serene double-storied Regency house appears square in plan, of three bays. It had a hipped roof, a central Doric porch, projecting from an encircling verandah and a substantial iron palisade fence.

A later tenant of *Summerland* was the Hon. William Sheils (1848-1904), for the last 14 years of his life. He was a lawyer and from 1880, member of the Legislative Assembly for

Normanby, an electorate which included Hamilton, Casterton and Coleraine. He was variously Minister for Railways, Treasurer and eventually, Premier of Victoria for 13 months until he resigned in January 1893, during the economic crash.

In 1890, the house was inherited by Georgina Wilson Fraser (née Watt). When she died in 1910, it was inherited by Elsie Rowe Crespín. The name of her husband, C.H.C. Crespín does not appear on the title.

The Crespíns commissioned Cowper's design. It was built in two stages, both with façades symmetrical about a central entry. The first block facing Fitzroy Street was completed in 1920. This comprised six shops and the dining room, facing the street. Each flat was 175m², double the size of many houses at that time. The cantilevered canopy extending across the Fitzroy Street front, suspended from long tie-rods at 45 degrees, back to second-floor level, is an early surviving example.

Four more flats, even larger at 200m² each, were built in the two-storied block along Acland Street, in the next year.

Post-war rents at Summerland declined, as the suburb became less fashionable. The property had remained in single ownership, but from 1954, flats were individually sold. But in 1988, the apartments were carefully renovated by architects Peter Johnson and Tony Walliss. The sleep-outs were made permanent and rebuilt to a unified design. Summerland remains prime St Kilda real estate.

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