

Australia's First Motels

By **SIMON REEVES** Built Heritage Pty Ltd



Victoria's oldest motel – the Oakleigh Motel in Melbourne's outer south-east – garnered much local publicity earlier this year, when it became the unlikely subject of consideration for the state's highest level of heritage protection – inclusion on the Victorian Heritage Register.

The motel, which opened in 1957, had been identified in a local heritage studies in 1991 and 1998 before being classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) in 2001, and then granted local heritage protection by the Monash City Council. But when the property changed ownership in 2008, and its new owners proposed a huge redevelopment, the local authority suddenly opposed its own heritage listing. The National Trust, supported by the Oakleigh Historical Society and

others, promptly nominated the building to Heritage Victoria. When the City of Monash requested a right of reply, the Heritage Council scheduled a registrations hearing for March 2009. Engaged by the National Trust to defend the proposed listing, the present writer prepared a submission that delved deeply into the historical and architectural context of the Oakleigh Motel, and, in doing so, opened up a portal into the fascinating and largely unexplored history of motels in Australia. →

← The term “motel” was used in Australia as early as May 1927, when the Canberra Times reported the recent opening of a chain of Californian roadside hotels that were “planned for the comfort and accommodation of touring motorists”. However, another decade passed before the first comparable facilities actually appeared in this country – invariably in the form of timber-framed fibro shacks located behind service stations. The West End Motel at Ballina (NSW), which has been cited as the first local example to use the word “motel” in its name, provided similarly rudimentary roadside accommodation in the form of four self-contained units with cooking and bathing facilities, but without private toilets. More reliably documented is the Penzance Motel at Eaglehawk Neck in Tasmania, which is often described as Australia’s first true motel. Reportedly opened in 1939, it was the brainchild of Donald C Richardson, a local farmer who had travelled to the USA and taken his inspiration from the original “motel” that opened at San Luis Obispo, California, back in 1925. The Penzance Motel, once described as “an American type motel with scattered units in chalets”, soon gained a reputation as a place of retreat, popular with authors, senior members of the judiciary (who would sequester themselves there to prepare their judgements), and business executives on leadership seminars. Another early local example was the Wilpena Pound Motel (aka Wilpena Chalet) in the Flinders Ranges (SA), which was opened by the State Government in 1945 and was again described in contemporary accounts as “chalet-style accommodation”.

There were virtually no comparable developments for another decade, save for a few that appeared, predictably enough, in the burgeoning post-war tourist mecca of Queensland’s Gold Coast. One of the first of these was the Tarzana Travelotel at Coolangatta (1949), followed by Bernie Elsey’s Skyrider Motel at Main Beach (1952). Although there was still nothing similar in New South Wales or Victoria, both of these states witnessed a burgeoning interest in the commercial potential of the modern American-style motel. In 1949, a young architectural student from Melbourne, Brian O’Connor, showed incredible foresight when he chose motels as the topic for his final year design thesis. The following year, a group of Sydney businessmen announced the formation of a new company, Hi-Way Motel Limited, which, as reported in the trade journal Building & Construction, proposed “to build motels on highways between capital cities, providing accommodation and garage service”.

In February 1954, the General Secretary of the Victorian Automotive Chamber of Commerce returned from a seven-month tour of the USA, full of enthusiasm for the modern motel. In an article published in the Clay Products Journal of Australia, he campaigned for local adoption, pointing out that “clearly, with its population fast approaching the 10,000,000 mark, and a certain amount of rapid growth by migration, Australia must sooner rather than later enter the motel business. No country seemed more suited to holidaying by motor car than Australia, with its far flung distances, wide open spaces and tourist attractions of multitudinous variety”.

However, it was another company, Cosy Cabins Ltd, that was responsible for Australia’s first truly modern American-style motel, which opened at Bathurst in New South Wales in 1954. The following year, another was established at Orange (NSW) by the late Hugh McCarron, who went on to become a leading figure →




Caravilla Motel de Ville, 461 Royal Parade, Parkville (1958)



Hi Ho Motel, Queensland Avenue, Broadbeach (1958)

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From top: Kirriwina Motel, Gympie Terrace, Noosaville (c.1960)
 Skyrider Motel, Western Highway, Katoomba (c.1960)
 Grandville "The Lakes" Motel, Lake Terrace, Mount Gambier, SA

← in the Australian hotel/motel industry. The year 1955 also saw the opening of Australia's third modern motel and Queensland's first – the Surfers Paradise Motel (later the El Dorado). Established by Greg Graham and Bill Reichelt, this was also the first motel in Australia to provide car-parking alongside each unit.

In March 1955, the Clay Products Journal of Australia again reported the formation of the country's first motel chain company, Accommodation Australia Ltd, noting that, "the belief, long fostered in the columns of this journal, that Australia is a land suited to the introduction of the motel system on a substantial scale, has at last found practical expression". By the end of that year, the company had acquired sites for motel development at Toowoomba, Glen Innes, Armidale, Grafton, Canberra, Yass, Gundagai, Albury, Dimboola, Melbourne and Mount Gambier. The company's advertisement for an architect came to the attention of Brian O'Connor in Melbourne, the same young architect who had completed his thesis on motels six years before.

Despite his expertise, however, O'Connor was initially reluctant to become involved. Instead, the company assembled a "think tank" of interested architects from Victoria and New South Wales, which not only included O'Connor but also Sydney Smith, Leslie Perrott and Walter Bunning. Ultimately, a limited competition was held for the design of the company's first motel – to be built in Canberra – and the first prize was duly awarded to O'Connor. Located on Northbourne Avenue, the new AA Motel, as it became known, was a brick building with 46 guest rooms arranged in discrete blocks around a courtyard, with a central roadhouse and a car service station. The new complex garnered considerable publicity in newspapers and architectural journals; when it opened in May 1956, the property columnist for the Melbourne's Herald newspaper simply stated that "motels have hit New South Wales and will soon be expected in Victoria".

By that time, however, there had already been a number of motel-related murmurings in Victoria. As early as January 1955, it had been reported that a motel was proposed to be erected on the Mornington Peninsula. Although nothing

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evidently came of that project at that time, the viability of motels in and around Melbourne was given a boost by the accommodation crisis associated with the forthcoming Olympic Games. In August of that same year, a newly-formed motel company, South Pacific Motels, announced its intention to build no fewer than seven motels throughout the metropolitan area, all to be completed in time for the Olympic Games in November 1956. The first of these was to be erected in Canterbury Road, Ringwood, to a design by architects Bernard Evans & Associates. The project, however, did not proceed. Two months later, Accommodation Australia Ltd announced how they had acquired a site for a "motor hotel" on the corner of Queens Road and Arthur Street in South Melbourne. The building, "designed along American lines", would provide 100 bedroom suites in a multi-storey tower. The firm's managing director, F M Felton, helpfully pointed out to the press that a motor hotel was a high-rise vertical building, while a "motel was a low-rise horizontal development. Once again, however, the project was abandoned – although Queens Road did, eventually, go on to become a significant motel strip in Melbourne.

Yet another local businessman who announced his intention to build a motel in time for the Olympic Games was one-time car salesman Cyril Lewis – the man behind the Oakleigh Motel. While he admittedly met with more success than the stary-eyed developers already mentioned, his project was nevertheless fraught with sufficient problems to delay its completion, ironically, until after the Olympic Games had finished.

Cyril Lewis (1911-1978), who also went by the name of Wilfred Ford, boasted a chequered career with a recurring entrepreneurial thread. By the age of twenty, he already held a senior position with the Bellworth Hosiery Mills in Coburg North (Victoria), then trained himself as a fitter and toolmaker and worked in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales. He later had brief stints as a salesman and an insurance agent before opening his own used car business in Northcote around 1947. Five years later, Lewis applied to the government for a grant to travel to the USA to study the manufacture of - of all things – plumbing supplies and sandpaper, evidently with a view to setting up local production. Although his application was rejected, Cyril Lewis finally made it to the USA a few years later, where he turned his entrepreneurial attention to the commercial potential of slick American-style motels.

Returning to Australia, Lewis acquired a site on the Dandenong Road at Oakleigh that had been occupied by a well-known local hotel, the Mulgrave Arms Hotel, for more than a century. Of more interest to Lewis, however, was the fact that the property conspicuously marked the halfway point of the Olympic Games Marathon route, being located 10 miles from the MCG.

While Cyril Lewis would later claim that he designed the Oakleigh Motel himself, research has proven that he actually assisted by a local design and drafting company known as TecDraft, which had recently been established by builder/designer/draftsman James Miller (1928-2005). Miller's original drawings for the Oakleigh Motel, dated January 1956, depict a building that was clearly much influenced by the motels that Cyril Lewis had seen in the USA, with a butterfly roof, sloped glazing, angled struts and huge billboard-like signage bearing the hotel's name in overscaled cursive lettering. It says something of Lewis' forceful personality that earlier drawings

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show signage with the name "Lewis' Motel", later amended in revised drawings to the more modest "Oakleigh Motel".

The Oakleigh Motel was opened belatedly in January 1957, with a special feature in that month's issue of RoyalAuto magazine. The 43-room complex was praised for its "ultra-modern" facilities, including wall-to-wall carpet, inner spring mattresses, tiled bathrooms, in-room telephones, air-conditioning and public dining room offering "first class meals". The new motel, it was proudly stated, "ranks in modernity with anything in the USA". Notwithstanding the enormous publicity generated by his venture, Cyril Lewis appears to have lost interest in the prospect of establishing his own chain and, although he retained ownership of the Oakleigh Motel until his death in 1978, he never built another one. He had, however, certainly opened the floodgates for countless others. The motel boom in Australia had well and truly begun. ■

Look for Part 2 of this fascinating study of early motels by Simon Reeves in your next issue of MO.

*All images from the collection of Simon Reeves.

Simon Reeves is the principal of Built Heritage Pty Ltd, a Melbourne-based heritage consultancy firm that specialises in twentieth century (and particularly post-Second World War) heritage places. He has spent several years researching the history of motels in Australia, with a view to the eventual publication of a book on the subject. Simon would be pleased to hear from anyone who has special knowledge of Australia's early motel industry, or may possess any photographs, press clippings, magazines, brochures or other memorabilia relating to this. He can be contacted through his website at www.builtheritage.com.au

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