



The former home of Mildura Irrigation Settlement pioneer, W B Chaffey.

THE HISTORY

George Chaffey and his brother William Benjamin arrived in Mildura in 1886, where they established the first irrigation scheme in Australia. Following great success with irrigation in California, the Chaffey brothers, originally from Canada, had been approached by Victorian Premier Alfred Deakin, who was under pressure to open up more land for farming and settlement.

The Chaffey families relocated to Mildura Station Homestead. Following the success of early irrigation development work, William began construction of Rio Vista in 1889. The Spanish style name Rio Vista (River View) reflects the Californian influences found in the Queen Anne style house.

In 1889 William's wife Hattie tragically died of pneumonia shortly after the birth of their sixth child. The baby died soon afterwards and was buried with his mother, close to the homestead. Whilst William continued on his many business trips to California, the rest of the family moved into the then completed Rio Vista, with William's mother and sister left in charge of the children. On William's last visit to America, he married his first wife's niece Hattie and brought her back to live at Rio Vista. Six more children were subsequently born to William and his second wife.

Although the Mildura scheme was a remarkable achievement, the Chaffey brothers encountered financial difficulties and never realised the dream of prosperity that Rio Vista symbolised. George Chaffey returned to America in 1897. William died in 1926, and Hattie remained living in the house for twenty-four years until her death in 1950.

Previously, in 1944, a valuable art collection had been bequeathed to the Mildura City Council by Senator R D Elliott, owner of the Elliott Newspaper Group. The bequest was on condition that a suitable place be found to house the collection. In 1950 Rio Vista



was purchased for £18,000 and converted into an art gallery. Several rooms in Rio Vista were converted for display purposes and many of the original surfaces were painted over. Conversion into the Mildura Art Gallery saved the house from probable demolition and subdivision of the surrounding grounds.

Rio Vista was opened as Mildura Art Gallery by Sir Dallas Brooks in May 1956. It remained as a gallery until 1966, when Sir Henry Bolte opened Mildura Regional Arts Centre. Rio Vista is one of Mildura's most important heritage buildings, and maintains a commanding presence in the Mildura Arts and Cultural Precinct.

In more recent times the focus has been on exploring the history of the Chaffey family, and restoration of Rio Vista to the splendour of its earlier years. Ongoing conservation and restoration works continue preservation of the facility for future generations, strengthening the story of its heritage and history within the cultural landscape.



THE ARCHITECTS

Architectural firm Messrs Sharland & Edmunds of Mildura were responsible for the design and building of Rio Vista. Among the sub-contractors who completed the building works were local firms Mr E N Wells, bricklayer, Chapman and Sherring, carpentry, while cabinetmaker Mr W Kells of Ontario, Canada was commissioned to complete the cabinetry and interior timber finishes. Of the structural materials used, the red bricks were produced by Chaffey's Mildura Brickworks and the Murray Pine and Red Gum timbers were acquired from Risby's Sawmill, Merbein. A feature of the exterior of Rio Vista is the tuck pointing of the brickwork and the decorative gable ends which dominate the roofline at the front of the building. The majority of the windows are double-hung and are fitted with internal timber blinds with adjustable louvres.

BASEMENT LEVEL

At the foot of the Basement Stairs are a cellar, originally used for storage, and a Butler's Pantry. The main space was designed as a ballroom complete with sprung floor, and a fireplace which has since been removed. Over the years, the effects of rising damp eroded the springs, causing the Murray Pine floorboards to expand and bow. The basement and foundation walls have largely been rebuilt and the five lightwells which provided natural light for the ballroom, have been lost.

GROUND FLOOR, HALLWAY/ENTRANCE

The beautiful tessellated entrance hall floor is made of Italian tiles and is complimented by dado wall panelling comprising a mix of two types of timber. Lining the upper sections of the walls is English made 'Lincrusta' embossed wallpaper. The luxurious look of the hallway is further enhanced by Cedar five-panelled doors with brass door furniture and topped with etched glass, each a testament to skilled manufacture and the highest quality materials. The only non-original decoration in this part of the house is the ceiling. In 2017 this was reconstructed using reproduction papers based on archival photographs and additional conservation research.

By far the stand out feature of the hallway is the grand Blackwood timber staircase which draws attention up to the double height stained glass window at the rear of the building. The hallway extends beyond the main staircase, past the Blackwood Servants' Staircase off to the left and terminates at a rear doorway and passageway leading to the Kitchen and Service areas, as well as the stairs to the basement level.

STAINED GLASS WINDOWS

These windows were handmade and imported from England, except for two hand-painted and stained glass panels in the main front door, noticeable for their modern imagery complete with 'Mildura' branded oranges. The 'roundels' depict English cottage and country scenes which were popular late-nineteenth century motifs.

SMOKING ROOM

Along with the dining room, the Smoking Room is in entirely original condition. The Smoking Room is dominated by decorative Murray Pine panelling on the walls and coffered ceiling. Moulds of Kauri Pine define the overall wall and ceiling design. Completing the timber finish is a tongue and groove floor of Western Australian Karri. The fireplace surround and hearth surround are of veined black and white marble. This marble fireplace, like others throughout the house, was imported from Italy and includes additional tiled decoration.

DINING ROOM

Of neo-classical revival style, this room retains its original finishes and furnishings. The mantelpiece is made of various colours of Italian marble, while the ornate coffered ceiling is local Murray Pine. Timber dado panelling and embossed wallpaper continue the style of wall finish used in the entrance hall. The floorboards, like those in the Drawing and Breakfast Rooms are of Jarrah. A notable item in this room is the Japanese Meiji era (late nineteenth century) Tsuitate (single legged) screen. Carved from Rosewood and inlaid with a decorated lacquer double-sided panel, the screen would have been used as a 'distraction' (a partition) across the service doorway leading to and from the kitchen.



DRAWING ROOM AND BREAKFAST ROOM

The floor plan of these rooms demonstrates a versatile use of space. Heavy drapes would at one time have hung from the archway between the two areas and could be drawn across to create two smaller rooms, or pulled back when open-plan was required, such as when the family entertained guests. Restoration work completed in 2006 saw new ceiling and wall papers installed which replicated the original bold designs made popular by the Aesthetic Movement. Fortuitously, the renovation work led to the discovery of four spandrel frescos on the archway which divides the rooms.

French doors located in the Breakfast Room open onto the side verandah where an aviary was positioned.

KITCHEN WING

Located across from the service entry to the Dining Room, this functional area of the house is comprised of a large kitchen, a scullery and a Butler's Pantry. These areas were recreated in 2002 and a wood-fuelled stove, similar to what would have been in Rio Vista, was sourced locally.

FIRST FLOOR

When the house was originally built this floor comprised five bedrooms, a bathroom/dressing room, walk-in wardrobes, and the Servants Quarters.

HALLWAY

This hallway also served as sitting room. It features the original embossed Lincrusta wallpaper and the original ceiling and cornice which underwent major conservation treatment in 2015. The floors are made of Western Australian Karri.

BEST BEDROOM AND BEDROOMS

In the late 1960s the Best Bedroom had been refurbished in a manner not in keeping with any of the original interior design of the house. In early 2016, the room was dramatically transformed by extensive renewal of paintwork and decorative papers. Ceiling and wall papers were skilfully recreated based on archival images and fragment of original wallpaper. In the future, the remaining bedrooms will also be restored to finishes which will complement the style of the Best Bedroom.

DRESSING ROOM (FORMER BATHROOM)

Located off the Best Bedroom the Dressing Room retains its original mosaic pattern floor tiles. It is believed that the room once contained a large marble bath with marble shower screen, and a hand basin.

SERVANTS QUARTERS

Accessed via the short flight of stairs off the main staircase landing, the servants' accommodation consists of two rooms and a bathroom linked by a short passageway. Currently, this area is not open to the public, as it is used for administration offices.

GARDENER'S COTTAGE AND SURROUNDS

A small two-storey building at the rear of Rio Vista and directly behind the Kitchen Wing, the ship-lapped board clad cottage included a Laundry, two toilets, Chaff Store, Tool Store all on the ground floor, with the three-roomed gardener's quarters on the first floor. Alongside the cottage were the stables and the garage. The surrounds included a vegetable garden, fruit orchards and today, the olive trees still remain at the rear of the grounds. There was also a gravel tennis court and a water well which was located behind the Conservatory.

At one time the Cottage housed the only toilet facilities for the occupants of Rio Vista.

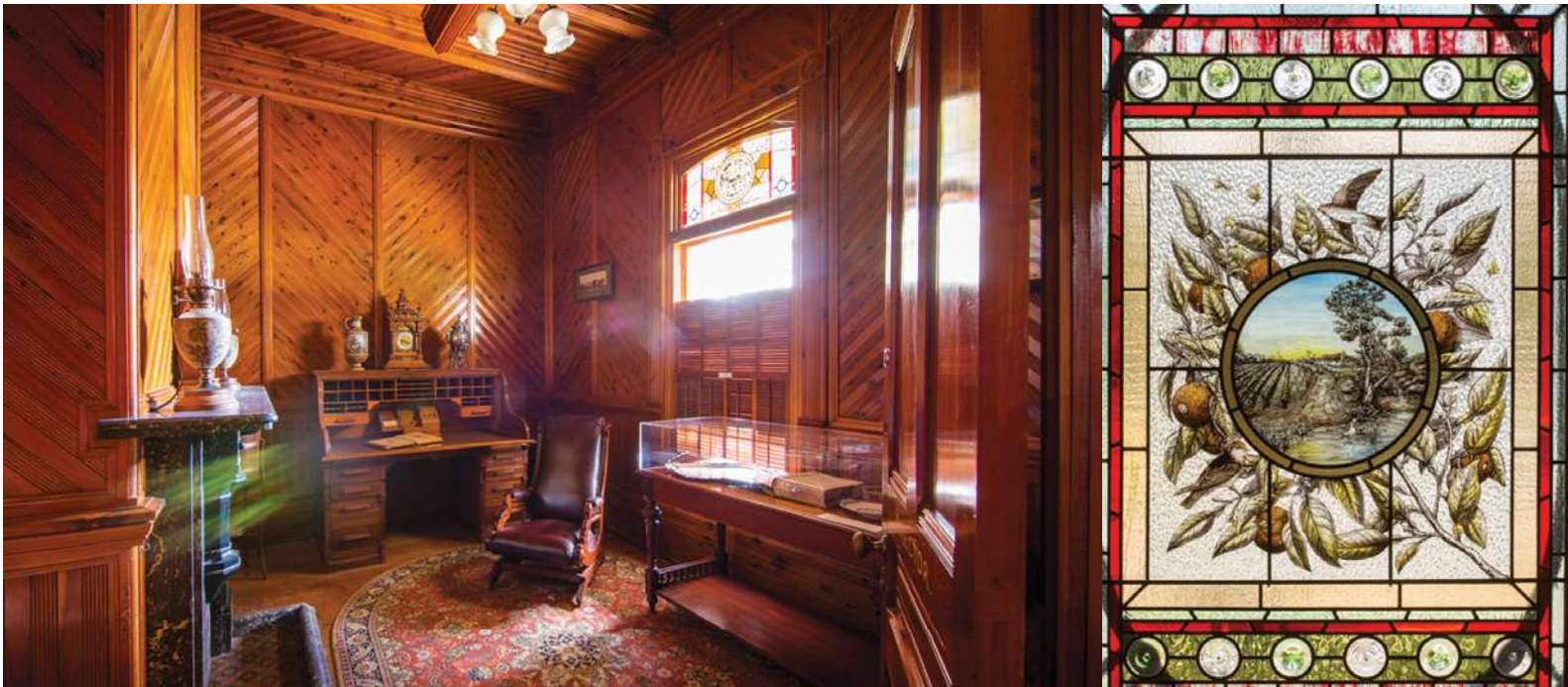
FOUNTAIN

Following the tragic drowning of one of the Chaffey children in 1897, the original Rio Vista fountain was turned off and stood idle until, in 1936, it was donated to the people of Mildura to commemorate the 25 year anniversary of the Coronation of King George V. This fountain is still a prominent landmark in Deakin Avenue. A replica fountain was installed in front of Rio Vista for its centenary celebrations in October 1991.

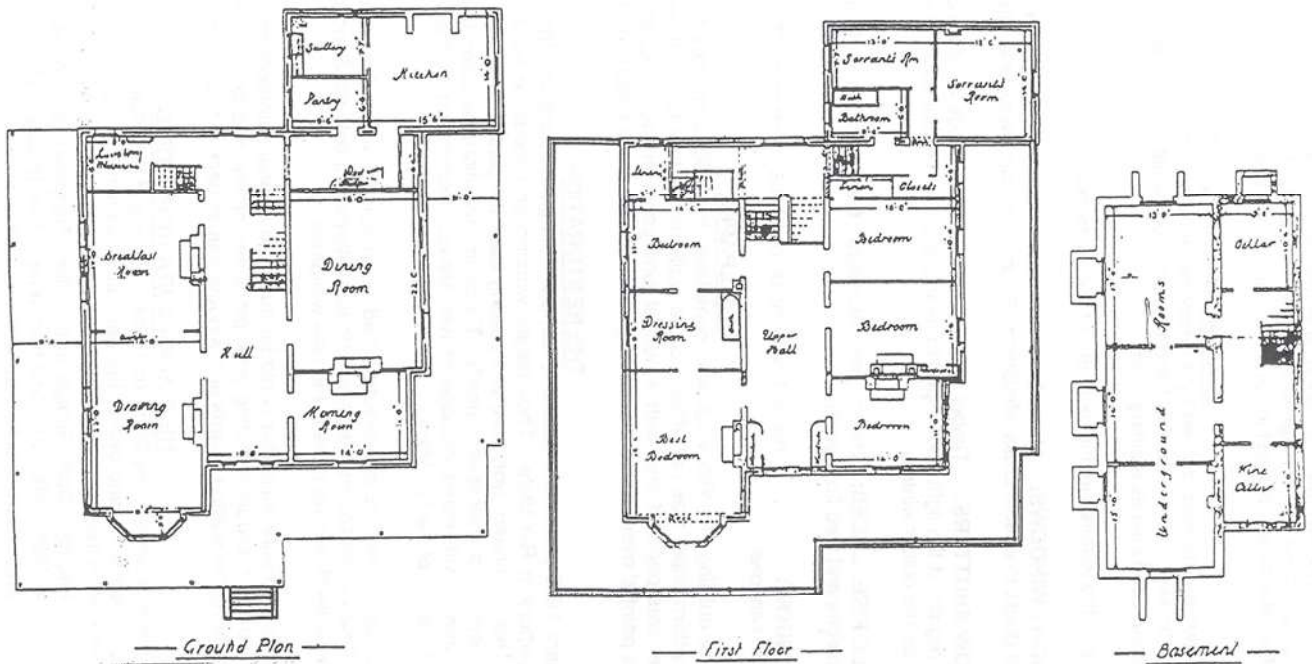
CONSERVATORY

Built upon brick foundations and constructed with timber and glass walls, the double-height Conservatory adjoined the main house and was accessed from the kitchen side verandah. By the 1950s, the structure was in such a state of disrepair that it was demolished.

RIO VISTA HISTORIC HOUSE



Rio Vista
Residence at Mildura
for W B Chaffey Esq



Architects Messrs Sharland & Edmunds plans largely followed ideas supplied by W B Chaffey.

© Mildura Arts Centre 2019. Images, logos and text are protected by copyright law. Individuals or organisations wishing to publish or reproduce any materials for commercial, educational or other uses are requested to contact Mildura Arts Centre.

For more information:

Mildura Arts Centre

199 Cureton Avenue, Mildura VIC 3500

Tel: (03) 5018 8330 milduraartscentre.com.au