

Parkin House

Parkin House is one of South Australia's most distinctive historic homes. It was built in 1858/59 of rendered bluestone and red brick and consists of sixteen rooms, an entrance hall and a wine cellar. The style and design of the house reflects the history and life-style of its first owner, William Parkin. In consultation with his builder, Parkin designed a house which was reminiscent of those he had left in England in 1839 and which would meet his specific needs. The two impressive formal rooms and entrance hall would allow him and his wife to entertain in style, while the rest of the house was to be of a more simple character. Since he had no children there was no need for extensive bedrooms and an upper floor, and in keeping with the standards of the time, the servants' quarters were Spartan. Built on two levels, the upper level provided for entertaining and family quarters, while the basement provided servants' quarters, kitchen and utility rooms. The basement, unusual in South Australian houses, but common in English houses of the period, also provided a large summer bedroom and a large summer drawing room, lit by full size windows and light wells. By retreating downstairs to these rooms Parkin and his wife could escape the rigours of the Adelaide summer. Climate also helped produce the unusual external design of a Georgian portico facing south while the other three sides of the house were protected by high verandas.

The house has a number of other interesting features. The formal rooms and entrance hall were decorated extensively with graining marbling. The work was executed by a skilled craftsman and reflected a late Georgian, early Victorian fascination with deceiving the eye, rather than a lack of funds to provide "the real thing" as many people now erroneously believe. Indeed the cost of using graining for the architraves and marbling for the walls and skirtings of the quality to be found in Parkin House was considerable. The house also retains its original shingle roof, now covered by a later iron roof, and its basement kitchen which is currently undergoing restoration.

Parkin House is one of only a small number of large nineteenth century houses to have survived in its original design form without later additions. It was originally surrounded by nine acres of garden and there were many ancillary buildings on the property, including stables, a carriage house and an orangery. Apart from the house itself, only the gardener's cottage and a wall of the stables have survived.

In his will, William Parkin expressed the wish that Plympton House, as he called his home, be used to accommodate trainee ministers. The Congregational church, however, decided that the house was too far from the city for such a use and leased it as a means of securing further income. In 1915 one of the lessees exercised his option to buy the property. After this, a succession of owners turned the gardens into a market garden and allowed the house to deteriorate. The basement was bricked up and used a storage cellar and the external staircase filled in and covered over. In 1963 the original nine acres were subdivided, leaving the house with three-quarters of an acre, and by 1979 the house had fallen into an alarming state of disrepair.

In that year, the house was acquired by Karl Schenscher and Robert Nicol a lecturer in history at the South Australian College of Advanced Education. They renamed it Parkin House in honour of its first owner, and in January 1980 began the work of meticulous restoration so that the house could be used as a recital venue and to house Australia's most important piano collection.

The restoration programme has included extensive structural repairs, considerable work on the flooring which had been ravaged by termites over several generations, renewal of the slate roof over the Georgian facade and replacement of many badly damaged sections of ornamental plaster-work. Considerable effort has also gone in to restoration of the original Victorian decorative scheme. Much of the grained timber had survived sufficiently intact, but only small sections of the marbled walls remained. These were carefully coped and the original scheme meticulously re-worked. Patient scraping of the walls has revealed many of the original colours and these had been duplicated. Cornices and ceiling roses have also been returned to their original colour schemes. Some later decorative features such as the pressed metal ceilings in two of the rooms were considered of sufficient importance and interest to be retained. These were added when the house was redecorated for the Congregational church after William Parkin's death. All the timber work in the smaller rooms of the house has had many layers of paint removed to reveal the original cedar and mahogany joinery.

A further important part of the restoration programme has involved tracking down original items from the house. Since William Parkin had no children his estate was widely dispersed and this has proved extremely difficult. To date, however, several items have been regained for the house. These include portraits of William Parkin in the red and blue rooms, the large silver candlesticks in the red room, the silver candelabra and silver urn in the dining room and the Victorian chaise lounge. Other items associated with the second Mrs Parkin have also been recovered. These include all the oriental items in the grey bedroom, which were sent to Adelaide by Ellen Parkin's brother-in-law, Wilton Hack. A nephew of pioneer John Barton Hack, Wilton spent considerable time in Japan in the 1870s working as a missionary. Several drawings executed by Ellen Parkin have also survived as well as numerous legal documents associated with William Parkin, his business activities and his estate.

From information supplied by The West Torrens Historical Society.