



# THE RACS SITE IN MELBOURNE

## EARLY HISTORY

In the 1830s Melbourne was no more than a settlement on the northern bank of the Yarra, clustered around Batman's Hill, near what is now Docklands. A few streets had been surveyed by Robert Hoddle, but east of Elizabeth Street they petered out as the township merged with the bush. By the 1840s settlement had reached the eastern outskirts, and a parcel of land in the northeast corner, of 2 acres 26 perches (0.875ha), was reserved as a town market.

The discovery of gold in 1851 at Mt Alexander effected a fundamental transformation on Melbourne, and brought with it very great challenges for the new government of the fledgling colony, in areas such as health, education, public infrastructure, and law and order. As a means of addressing serious problems in education, a National Board of Education was constituted on 31 December 1851. Its first chairman was Dr (later Sir) James Palmer.

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### JAMES FREDERICK PALMER

Palmer was born on 7 June 1803 in Devon, and was a great-nephew of the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds. Having decided on a career in medicine, he was articled to Dr John Gunning, the distinguished military surgeon.

After failing to obtain a number of surgical posts, Palmer became disappointed with his prospects in England, and migrated to Australia. He registered with the Medical Board of New South Wales on 21 February 1842, but soon gave up surgery. He went into several commercial ventures, the most profitable of which was the ferry across the Yarra which he established near his home in Hawthorn. "Palmer's Punt" operated for many years before being replaced by the Hawthorn Bridge.

Palmer was Mayor of Melbourne 1845-46, and was elected to the interim Legislative Council in 1851. He became the first President of the Legislative Council of Victoria in 1856, and was knighted the following year. He retained the Presidency of the Council until his retirement in 1870. He played a key rôle in the foundation of the (Royal) Melbourne Hospital, was its vice-president 1851-65, and president 1865-70. He was chairman of the National Board of Education 1851-62. He died in 1871. A stained glass window in Christchurch Hawthorn, after a design by Sir Joshua Reynolds, commemorates his life and work.







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## ACQUIRING THE SITE

On 10 May 1852, a deputation of six gentlemen, headed by Dr Palmer, met with Lieutenant-Governor C.J. La Trobe to ask for the provision of land for a school. La Trobe granted the land intended for the town market, bounded by Spring, Albert and Flint (now Nicholson) Streets and Victoria Parade, to the National Board of Education, reserving it “for educational purposes”. On 7 June 1852, the architect Francis Maloney White was instructed to prepare plans for the building.

Through the agency of James Palmer, in his rôle as chairman of the National Board of Education, the site on which the College now stands was reserved for educational purposes, a function it preserves to this day. The fact that Palmer was by profession a surgeon confirms the link between education and surgery which the College continues today and will continue in the future.

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## THE NATIONAL MODEL and TRAINING SCHOOL

Tenders for the school building were called on 12 July, but by the end of February 1853, no appreciable progress had been made with construction. Because of White’s dilatoriness, the Board decided to call for new designs by public competition, offering a prize of £50 to the winner. On 16 April 1853, Arthur Ebdon Johnson was declared the winner. A second prize of £25 was awarded to White. This is rather ironic, as White & Johnson became a prominent architectural partnership in 19th-century Melbourne.

A.E. Johnson was trained in London, and won the Royal Academy medal in 1843, and the prestigious Soane Medal in 1845, before migrating to Australia. His best known building is the former GPO in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne.

The first contract was let on 25 April to Thomas Mahony, who undertook to erect the Albert (Lonsdale) Street frontage for £16,000. After numerous delays and obstructions, this portion of the work was completed in April 1854. A second contract for the central classrooms was let to John Snowball. In December 1854 a report found that, as well as skylights that were shattered in a storm, chimneys smoked for want of cowls, doors were badly hung, windows would not shut, and blinds were not fit for use. In short, on top of its “staunch bluestone” foundations, the place was jerrybuilt. Johnson estimated it would cost a further £19,250 to complete his design. By May 1855 the main school block was built, decorated and furnished. A third contract for finishing and decorating was complete by April 1856, but one month later the ceiling of the infants’ room fell down, and had to be reinstated.



Albert St frontage



National Model and Training School, 1859





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## THE SCHOOL FLOURISHES, THEN DECLINES

The “Model & Normal” School opened incomplete on 18 September 1854. The first principal, Arthur Davitt, arrived with his wife Ellen on 30 July, having sailed from Liverpool on the maiden voyage of the *Lightning*, the fastest clipper ship of her day, under the command of the notorious James Nicol “Bully” Forbes. Arthur Davitt was to be in overall charge, and also in charge of the boys’ education, while Ellen, as “superintendent”, took charge of the girls’ education. At first all went well. But Arthur Davitt’s health began to fail, and he quarrelled with the Board. He retired from official duties in 1859 and died in Geelong in 1860.

Davitt was eventually succeeded by Patrick Whyte, one of the most influential educators Australia has known. He entered the School as a trainee in 1855, and by the late 1850s was in charge of the daily operation of the School. He became principal in 1865, and remained in that office until 1886. Under his guidance the staffing was stabilized, curricula were rationalized, and attendance grew. He maintained high standards of teaching and training, and the School’s reputation was solid. Whyte enjoyed excellent relations with the Board of Education and its successor, the Department of Education.

Over the years, changes to the structure of state education meant that the School underwent a number of changes in both name and tenancy. From 1854 to 1862 the National Board of Education, and from 1862 to 1872, the Board of Education, had their offices in the building. With the establishment of the Department of Education in 1872, the educational administration was moved out, finally relocating to the New Treasury in 1878. In 1888 a new teacher training college was begun in a corner of the University of Melbourne grounds. Many of the School’s rooms were now vacant, as the residential population of central Melbourne fell during the 1880s and ’90s, and pupils went to new schools in the suburbs.

The names under which the School was known are many: National Model & Training School, Model & Normal School, Central Common School, Melbourne Central School 391, Melbourne Continuation School, Melbourne High School, and, to its pupils, the Old Model School.

It was during the economic depression of the 1890s that the School fell into serious disrepair, due in no small part to its original poor construction. In December 1904 the Model School was closed. The buildings and grounds underwent a thorough refurbishment, and the next year the school was re-opened as the Melbourne Continuation School.



View of school from Exhibition St



Old Model School, 1892





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## MELBOURNE HIGH SCHOOL

**This was to be the last incarnation of the old Model School. With the recovery from the 1890s recession, and the move of many schools to the suburbs, the need for a co-educational government school in the central city area had re-emerged. In 1904 the School was refurbished for the last time, but even then it was recognized that the old buildings could not go on for very much longer. When it re-opened on 15 February 1905, it was renamed Melbourne Continuation School. In 1912 this was changed to Melbourne High School.**

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By 1914 the School could not hold all its pupils, and “The Branch” was opened at the Horticultural Society’s property further along Victoria Street. Knowing that the main buildings were near the end of their life, Frank Tate, Director of Education, began to search in earnest for an alternative site on which to build a new school. The situation increased in urgency from 1917, when there were several collapses of plaster and cement, and worried parents began removing their children in fear for their safety.

Toward the end of 1923, two important events occurred. The first was the granting of land in South Yarra for the new school, and Frank Tate went on a study tour to the USA to find a suitable prototype. The second was the appointment of Claude Searby as the new principal.

Searby had come to the old Model School as a teacher in 1887. Here he met his future wife, Rhoda Coomer. He left to attend the Training College, and returned to teach at the Continuation School in 1908, becoming vice-principal in 1913. After another absence, he returned as principal for the 1924 year. His son Henry (1897-1967) became a very eminent surgeon.

Claude Searby was resolutely opposed to co-education, and it was his view that prevailed, leading to the separation of the boys’ and girls’ schools. Thus only the boys moved to the new school in South Yarra in 1927, while the girls had to remain in the crumbling old pile until 1931, when it was condemned. They then began a nomadic existence, including a period at Government House, which had remained empty since the departure of the Governor-General to Canberra in 1927. It ended only when Sir MacPherson Robertson, the chocolate baron, gave £40,000 for the construction of a girls’ high school in Albert Park.

The old School now stood empty and derelict. An opportunity awaited. Enter Mr H.B. Devine, honorary surgeon and lecturer in surgery at St Vincent’s Hospital.



Old Model School, 1902



Old Model School, 1910





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## RACS BEGINNINGS

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) was founded in 1927 as a result of several years' hard work by a determined group of prominent Melbourne surgeons who were anxious to improve standards of surgery.

Once it was formally established, the College needed premises from which to administer the organisation.

The first office of the College was a single room at No.6 Collins Street, in the old Alcaston House.

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Old Alcaston building, top of Collins St



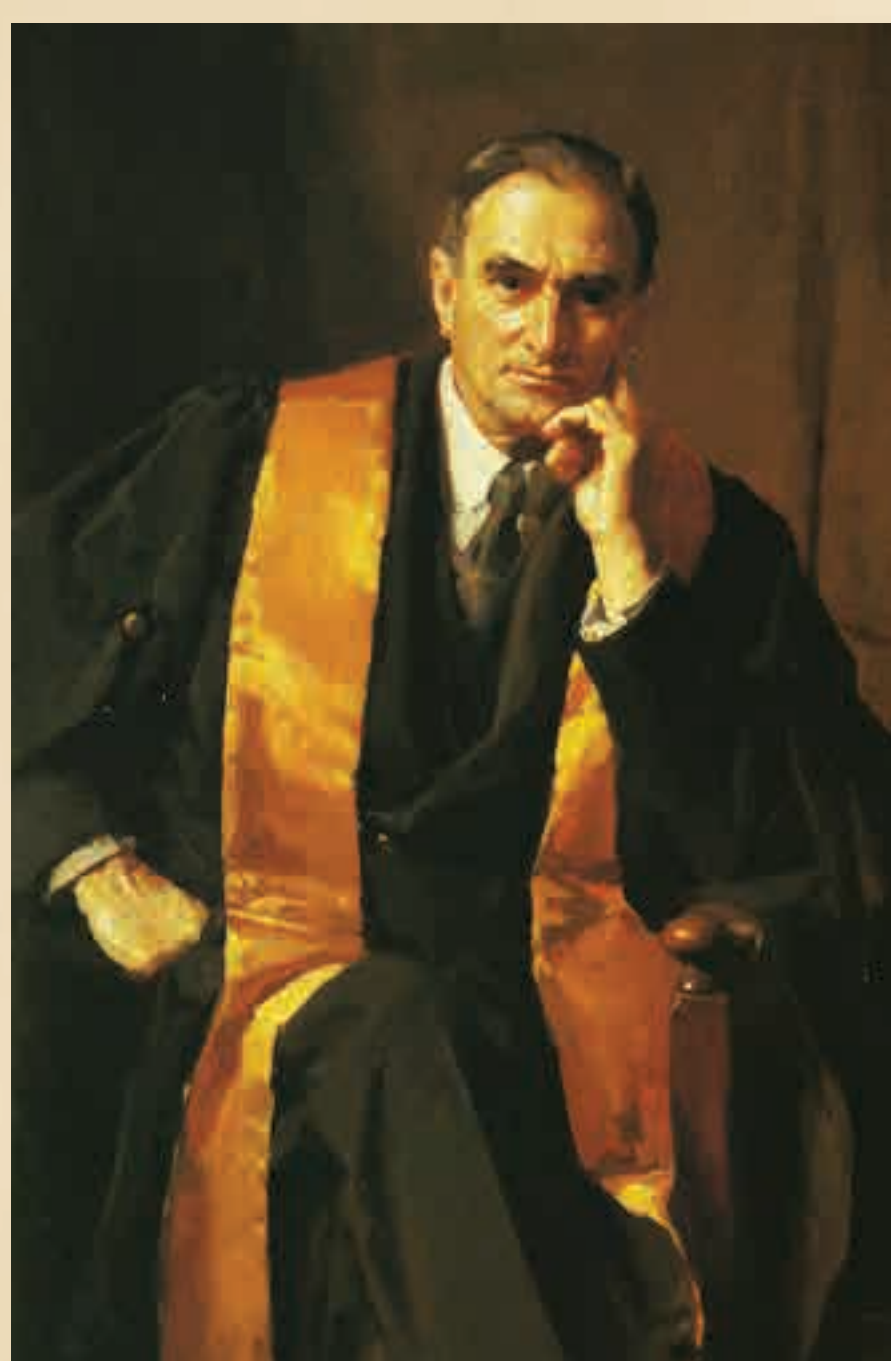


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## RACS ACQUIRES THE SITE

Hugh Devine had been one of the driving forces behind the foundation of the College, and secured for it several privileges, including the Grant of Arms, the Great Mace, the prefix 'Royal' and incorporation under the laws of the State of Victoria. He also knew that the College needed a permanent home. An early attempt to secure land in the newly-built National Capital had proved abortive, and it was subsequently agreed that, as Melbourne was then the demographic epicentre of the Australasian region, the national headquarters of the College should be there.

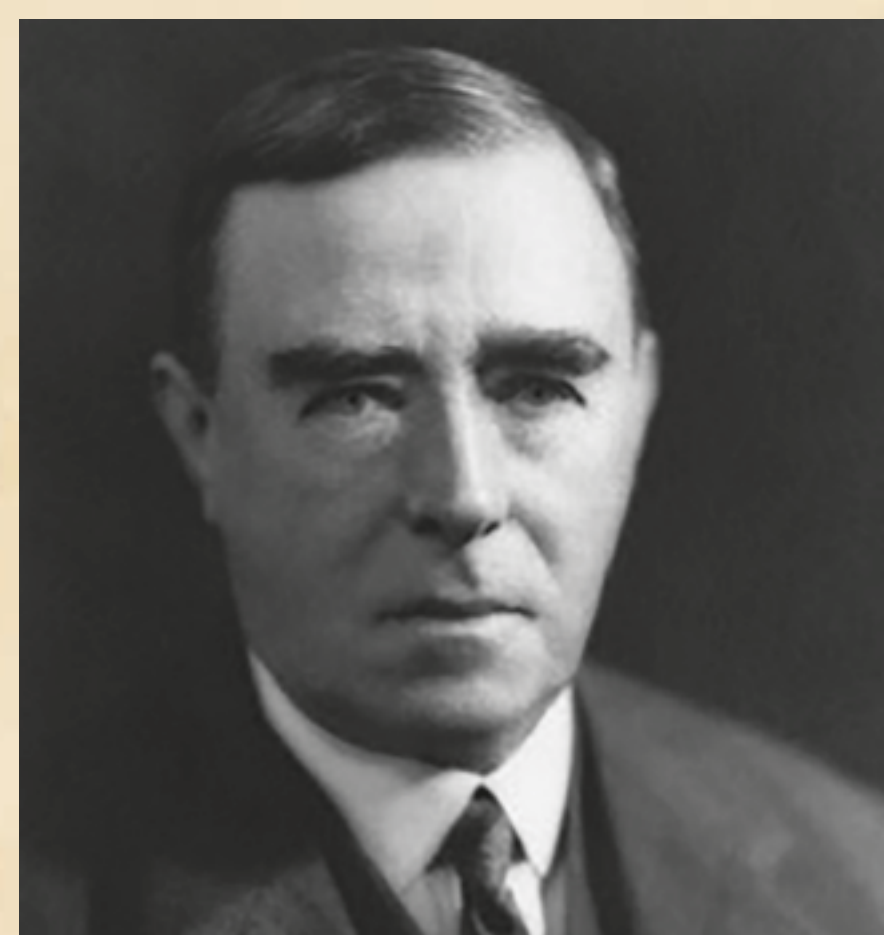
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Sir Hugh Devine

The site of the School must have seen perfect to Devine. Spacious grounds with a grand edifice, and, located just across the street from St Vincent's, much more convenient than the cramped premises at 6 Collins Street. Through the Executive Committee, the College negotiated with the government of E.J. Hogan for a 50-year lease on the southern half of the site. But officialdom insisted that the whole of the site had to be leased (on separate leases), that the College maintain the grounds and fences, and within 10 years should expend £15,000 on new buildings and improvements. In April 1932 the College reluctantly consented to these terms. But less than a month later the Hogan government was thrown out of office. Devine now found a powerful ally in his old friend Sir Stanley Argyle.

Stanley Seymour Argyle was born in 1867 at Kyneton in central Victoria. He graduated in medicine from the University of Melbourne (MB 1890, ChB 1891), and in 1892 went to England, gaining the MRCS/LRCP conjoint diploma before going on to study bacteriology at King's College, London. During WWI he served with the Australian General Hospital in Cairo.



Sir Stanley Argyle

After the War Argyle set up practice in Collins Street, but by 1920 had entered politics. He was persuaded to stand against Barrett for the Assembly seat of Toorak, which he won easily. By 1924 he had attained the posts of chief secretary and minister of health, but nevertheless retained his appointment as director of radiology at the Alfred Hospital until 1929. In 1925 he was elected president of the Victorian branch of the BMA. After a period on the opposition benches, Argyle returned to power in 1932 with the defeat of the Hogan government. He was now premier, treasurer and minister of health. He remained in power until April 1935, when he was defeated by a Labor-Country Party coalition. He died at Toorak in November 1940.

With such an influential and sympathetic friend in the premier's office, it is little wonder that Devine secured very favourable terms for the College and its tenure of the site. Argyle immediately varied the conditions of the lease. The College could have the whole of the land for 50 years at a rental of £1 per annum, with an option to renew for another fifty, provided it erected a new building on the site before September 1934. The government would pay for the landscaping of the site, and the gardens would be maintained by the Melbourne City Council. The lease was signed on 4 July 1933. With this certainty, the College set about raising the funds it needed for its new headquarters.





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## A HOME TO BE PROUD OF

The original intention of the College had been to renovate and remodel the old School, and to this end engaged Leighton Irwin (1892-1962), Professor of Architecture at the University of Melbourne, to inspect the building and make recommendations. A building appeal was instituted, and by April 1933, Fellows had contributed over £4,300. Council felt confident in proceeding with the project. But the ancient fabric was by now so decrepit that Irwin reported that, even with total refurbishment, he could not guarantee the existing building beyond ten years. Irwin prepared plans for a completely new building, and the venerable School was demolished in August and September of 1933.

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Demolition of the Old Model School

Irwin's new building provided office space, a meeting room for Council, a library, and a small lecture hall (now the Hughes Room). Provision was made for a future extension at the rear, comprising a large auditorium. The building was designed as a pavilion, ie a freestanding edifice with four facades. It was to stand slightly askew of the old School building, as the Melbourne City Council had altered the alignment of Albert Street. The contract was let to J.C. Taylor & Sons for £12,290, somewhat more than the College had expected. Irwin was asked to make some economies. He suggested that savings could be made by constructing a less dignified entrance, although he felt reluctant to compromise the quality of the south front as he believed that this was the most important civic building to be erected in Melbourne for many years. The Executive Committee agreed, and set about finding the extra funds. Donations were obtained from a number of prominent Melburnians, including Sidney Myer and Norman Baillieu. Mr F.J. Cato, father of one of the Foundation Fellows,



Construction of the Hughes Room, 1934

gave £500, and the eminent physician (Sir) A.E. Rowden White provided £1,000, saying that his gift was made as much from good citizenship as from being a member of the medical profession. He thought the site so prominent, and the building so prestigious, that its principal aspect had to be of the highest quality. Thus the imposing stone portico and the heavy bronze doors, which are such important elements in the design, were made possible.



View towards Fitzroy, 1934

By mid-1934 the building was habitable, with only finishing and decorating to be done. The College's administrative functions were moved in on 5 November 1934.

The opening ceremony had always been intended to coincide with the centenary celebrations of the City of Melbourne. Council had considered asking a member of the Royal Family to lay the foundation stone, and the President of the Royal College of Surgeons, Sir Holburt Waring, to perform the opening ceremony. Members of all the medical colleges were invited to attend. However, difficulties with arranging a suitable date forced some amendments. Finally the date was fixed at 4 March 1935, when the new headquarters was officially opened by Sir Holburt Waring with all due pomp. Among the honoured guests was the premier, Sir Stanley Argyle. Also present, as a Founder of the College, was Argyle's old adversary Sir James Barrett, by now vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne.





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## LATER EXTENSIONS

For some years after the opening, only the ground floor of the building was occupied. The basement was used as a store, and the upper floor, intended to house the library at the east end and the museum at the west, was left vacant. But with the passage of time the College's size and activities had grown, and the vacant spaces had been filled up as offices. Other organisations such as Red Cross and the Anti-Cancer Council occupied parts of the building. When Council grew too large to be accommodated in its original space it moved into the library at the west end of the ground floor. When it outgrew this room, the space reserved for the library on the first floor was turned into the Council Room. The ground floor room became the original Hailes Room. The library was sent to the Attic.

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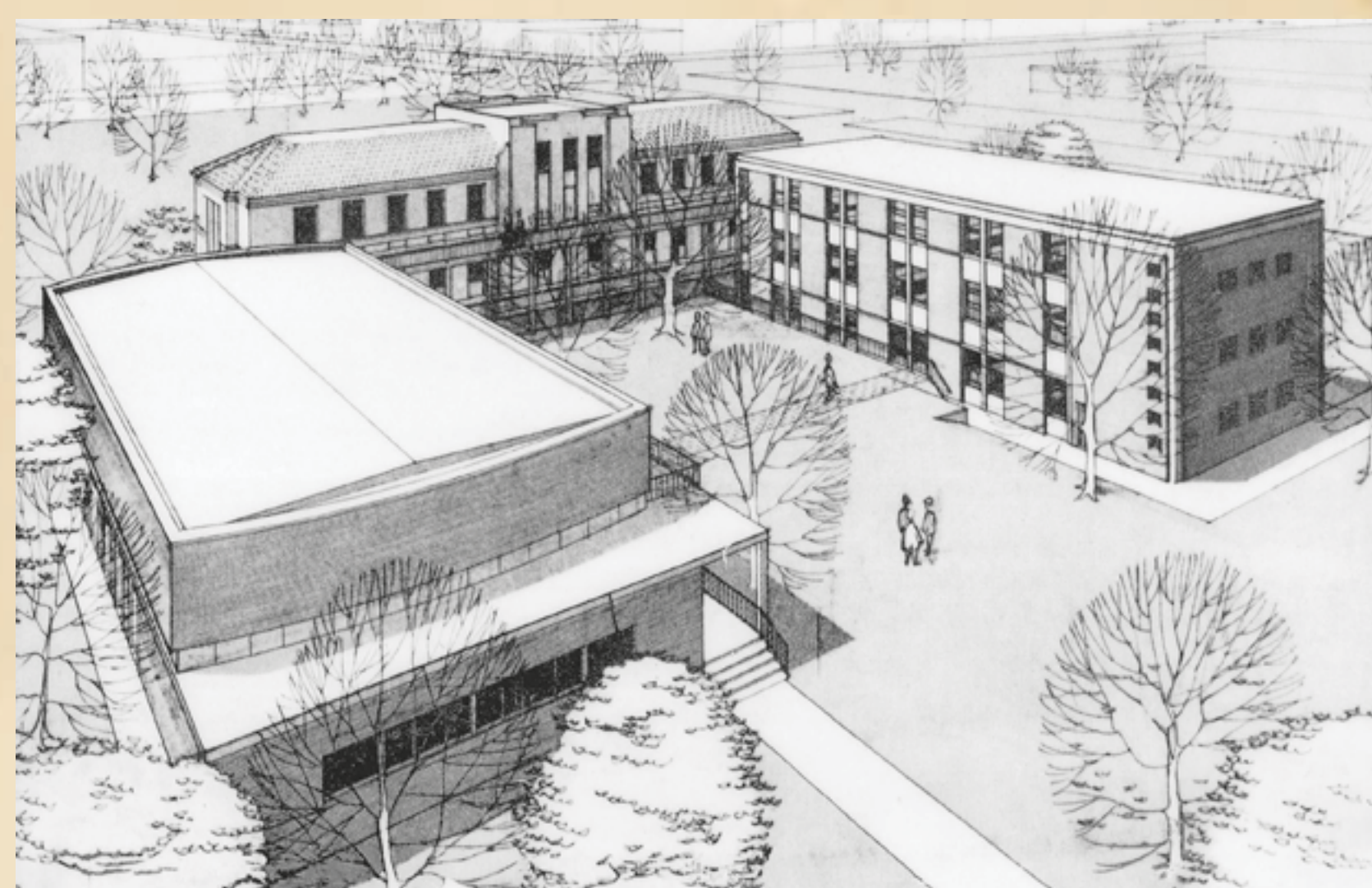
By the late 1950s it was clear that the College would soon outgrow its premises. A public appeal raised £304,000. The president of the appeal was Lord Casey, recently retired from politics, and married to the daughter of one of Melbourne's most colourful early surgeons, Charles Snodgrass 'Plevna' Ryan. As a result of his work for the College, Casey was admitted to Honorary Fellowship in 1962.

Designs for the extensions were sought from Leighton Irwin & Co. But now the original (unrealized) concept of a T-shaped building had to be modified. Not only was a large auditorium to be built, but also an education wing, housing laboratories for anatomy and pathology, a museum, seminar and tutorial rooms, offices, storage and a caretaker's flat. Thus the complex of buildings became U-shaped, the Great Hall on the east side, and the education wing on the west. This substantially altered the character of the surrounding gardens. The foundation stone was laid on 6 March 1964 by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies. The extensions, constructed at a cost of £176,325, were opened by Lord Casey, now Governor-General, on 26 February 1965.

In 1969 a bronze fountain by sculptor Stephen Walker, called 'Forest Landscape', was installed in the courtyard.



Building of the West Wing, 1934



Architect's drawing of 1964 extensions





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## MORE DEVELOPMENT

Again progress and development placed strains on the building. The library was relocated to the top floor of the education wing in the 1970s, and the Hailes Room moved upstairs to its present location. The museum survived into the 1980s but was eventually resumed for office space. Having already been awarded the RVIA Street Architecture Medal in 1937, the original 1934 building was listed on the Victorian Historic Buildings Register on 30 July 1991, and on the Register of the National Estate on 30 June 1992. In 2009 the land became part of the buffer zone around the Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens World Heritage site.

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Demolition of the Great Hall

Redevelopment was again necessary. The heritage listing of the 1934 building placed severe restrictions on what could be done there, and so the Great Hall was viewed as the area with the most potential for redevelopment. But two problems presented themselves: the Hall was

becoming structurally unstable, and was found to contain quantities of loose particulate asbestos. In 2002 it was demolished to make way for a new Skills and Education Centre. In the course of this demolition the remains of the old School came once again to the surface, and were excavated by a team of archaeologists working for Heritage Victoria. The land is now a registered archaeological site.



Archaeological excavations



Aerial image of excavation