



134 Macquarie Street (GPO Box 618)
Hobart Tasmania 7001
Phone: 1300 850 332 (local call cost)
Email: enquiries@heritage.tas.gov.au
Web: www.heritage.tas.gov.au

Name: J & T Gunn Building
Status: Provisionally Registered
Tier: State

THR ID Number: 12093
Municipality: Launceston City
Council
Boundary: CPR11441

Location Addresses

50 BRISBANE ST, LAUNCESTON 7250 TAS
61 GEORGE ST, LAUNCESTON 7250 TAS
50B BRISBANE ST, LAUNCESTON 7250 TAS

Title References

54574/23
54574/24
54574/25

Property Id

7729937
3365531
7729945



J & T Gunn Building - Brisbane Street façade
©NRE 2023



J & T Gunn Building - Basement fire doors and
timber floor
©NRE 2023



J & T Gunn Building - Brisbane Street façade
detail
©NRE 2020



J & T Gunn Building - North-eastern side from
Yorktown Square
©NRE 2023



J & T Gunn Building – Ground floor safe door
©NRE 2023



J & T Gunn Building - First floor interior
©NRE 2020



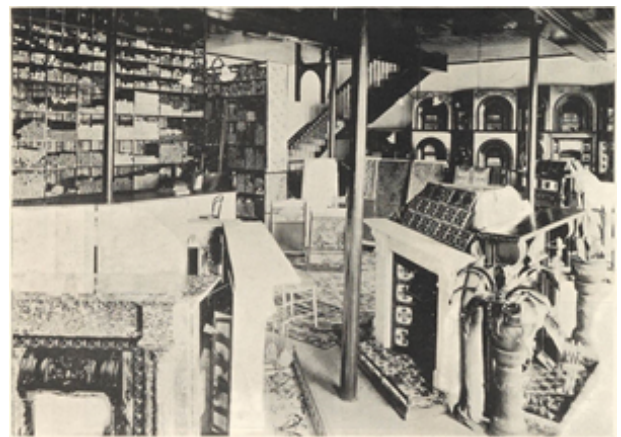
Circa 1892 building - prior to fire
Weekly Courier 7 March 1903



J & T Gunn building as rebuilt following fire - May 1931
Weekly Courier 15 July 1931



Interior - Ground floor showroom and offices -
c.1900
Weekly Courier 7 March 1903



Interior - Ground floor showroom and offices -
c.1900
Weekly Courier 7 March 1903

Statement of Significance: (non-statutory summary)

The J & T Gunn Building is of historic cultural heritage significance as a largely intact example of an Italianate style office and showroom building designed and built by one of Tasmania's largest and longest operating construction and timber production companies, which was used as their administrative and retail centre for almost 90 years of their existence as a family company. The building is also of significance as, through its elaborate design and its evolution over time, it is useful in

demonstrating the changes of fortune of the innovative vertically integrated company, its founding family, and the state of Tasmania, from the resource led economic boom of the 1890s, through the hardship of the Great Depression and into the motor-vehicle reliant era which led to the relocation of company headquarters, along with the retail showrooms, to the city fringe.

Individual members of the Gunn family are also recognised as important to the history of Tasmania, and the J & T Gunn Building is considered to be significant in its connection to these characters, most notably the founding brothers, John and Thomas Gunn, who were respected and appreciated by their employees and throughout the broader community, and John's grandson Frederick John (John) Gunn who led the company from 1946-77 and was well known and respected for his involvement in the military, community service and artistic spheres.

Following the Gunn company's departure, the building took on new roles in Launceston's urban renewal as part of the Yorktown Square development, most significantly as a nightclub and centre of youth culture for 20 years, providing a safe place for locals and visiting students to display social prowess, participate in rites of passage and embrace the changing times through popular music and dance.

Why is it significant?:

The Heritage Council may enter a place in the Heritage Register if it meets one or more of the following criteria from the Historic Cultural Heritage Act 1995:

a) The place is important to the course or pattern of Tasmania's history.

The J & T Gunn Building is of historic cultural heritage significance because of its role in the evolution and success of one of Tasmania's pre-eminent construction and timber production companies, having served as their administration and retail centre for almost 90 years (1892-1980).

Having been designed by one of the founders and built by the company in the 1890s, before being re-built at a smaller scale after a fire in 1931, the place also stands as a physical representation of a substantial part of the history of the prominent Gunn family, the vertically integrated company they created, and their built legacy. This history may also be read as a reflection of the changing prosperity of Launceston and Tasmania as a whole, with the grand gesture of the original building representing the resource-led economic boom of the 1890s, and the downscaling between the wars relating to the hardship of the Great Depression. The relocation of the Gunn company headquarters, along with the retail showrooms, from this premises to the city fringe in the 1980s is also representative of the general move into a more motor-vehicle reliant era which would in turn further change the appearance and life of the inner city.

Following the Gunn company's departure, their former premises continued its life and gained new significance as a major part of the Yorktown Square urban renewal project in 1984 which replaced back yards with a shopping precinct around a semi-public space. While the ground floor of 50 Brisbane Street was retained as a walk-through shop, the upper level was developed as Twains, a nightclub which became an important part of youth culture for 20 years, providing a safe place for locals and visiting students to display social prowess, participate in rites of passage and embrace the changing times through popular music and dance.

b) The place possesses uncommon or rare aspects of Tasmania's history.

No data recorded.

c) The place has the potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Tasmania's history.

The J & T Gunn Building is of historic cultural heritage significance because it was the administration and retail centre of a building and material and hardware supply company responsible for the construction of a high proportion of the most significant buildings in Launceston and northern Tasmania. While the exterior of this building was substantially rebuilt in 1931 and the showroom and office interiors were largely removed in the 1980s, there is potential for further research on the site relating to the history of the company and its projects and wares, and this may be useful in furthering the understanding of the development of other significant places and the company itself, which played a substantial role in the economic and physical development of Tasmania. The reduction in scale of the building on the site following the fire of 1931, reportedly due to the hardship of the Great Depression, and the three months taken for the re-construction may also be a subject for further research.

d) The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of place in Tasmania's history.

The J & T Gunn Building is of historic cultural heritage significance because of its ability to demonstrate the principal characteristics of a double storey brick and stuccoed Victorian Italianate commercial building, which through its grand appearance, and its re-construction following fire in 1931, also represents the image and commercial success of the vertically integrated construction and timber production company which was responsible for both its design and construction and occupied its showrooms and offices for almost 90 years.

e) The place is important in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement.

No data recorded.

- f) **The place has a strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social or spiritual reasons.**

No data recorded.

- g) **The place has a special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Tasmania's history.**

The J & T Gunn Building is of historic cultural heritage significance because of its close association with J & T Gunn and its evolution from a building partnership of brothers to one of Tasmania's largest and most successful construction and timber production companies, recognised for both the high quality of their work and their progressive approaches to diversification and staff retention. Perhaps of greatest significance was the company's development of a vertically integrated structure, providing the services to design and construct a wide range of buildings across the state, as well as the sawmills, timber yards, quarries, brickworks, and hardware supplies required to complete them, and this approach was evident in the design, procurement, and operation of the place, all undertaken by the company.

Also of significance is the number and quality of buildings and other structures constructed by the company, with many of Launceston and northern Tasmania's most significant counted amongst them. Individual members of the Gunn family are also noted as being of importance in the history of Tasmania, the most prominent being the founders, brothers John and Thomas Gunn who were respected and appreciated by their employees and throughout the broader community, and John's grandson Frederick John (John) Gunn who led the company from 1946-77 and was well known and respected for his involvement in the military, community service and artistic spheres.

- h) **The place is important in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.**

No data recorded.

Heritage approval is required for work that will result in changes to the nature or appearance of the fabric of a Heritage place, both internal and external.

Please refer to the Heritage Council's Works Guidelines (www.heritage.tas.gov.au) for information about the level of approval required and appropriate outcomes.

Heritage Advisors are also available to answer questions and provide guidance on enquiries@heritage.tas.gov.au or Tel 1300850332

This data sheet is intended to provide sufficient information and justification for listing the place on the Heritage Register. Under the legislation, only one of the criteria needs to be met. The data sheet is not intended to be a comprehensive inventory of the heritage values of the place, there may be other heritage values of interest to the Heritage Council not currently acknowledged.

Setting:

The former J & T Gunn building is located on Brisbane Street in the geographic and business centre of Launceston in Northern Tasmania, a city renowned for its well-preserved human-scale streetscapes of largely Victorian era buildings.

The building fronts the main 'east-west' commercial retail street, occupying the corner of Brisbane Street and the laneway leading to 'Yorktown Square', a shopping precinct and car park established in 1984. The building forms a substantial part of an historic, if eclectic, urban streetscape, including other buildings of Victorian and Federation era revivalist styles, as well as significant examples of Art Deco and Modernist architecture.

Description:

The building now standing at 50 Brisbane Street is a semi-detached double storey brick and stuccoed commercial building designed by John Gunn, modified from the original triple storey structure following a fire in 1931. The original Victorian era Italianate style building designed by Gunn and constructed c.1892, was largely replicated in this new design, with the omission of the second floor and central tower, and some alteration to the ground floor window openings, evident in photographs from the *Weekly Courier*, 7 March 1903, p.19 and 15 July 1931, p.28.

The structure is built up to its boundaries and the parapeted front façade is highly decorated with pilasters, pediments, brackets, and balustrading, loosely classical in their form and symmetrical composition. An elaborate vertical extension to the centre of the parapet, apparently referencing the original tower, forms a distinctive feature on the current façade and the broken curved pediment over the central doorway forms a strong entry feature and appears almost mannerist in execution. The windows are of a variety of shapes and a number of openings have been altered, and glazing replaced, over time.

The entire original interior was lost in the fire (*Weekly Courier* 4 February 1931, p.25) and the 1931 interior has also been highly modified following use of the ground floor as a retail store and the first floor as a nightclub, part of the Pavilion Tavern established as part of the Yorktown Square development in 1984. The plaque that occupied the top of the central parapet noting the establishment of J & T Gunn in 1875 was also replaced at this time with a sign noting the development of Yorktown Square in 1984.

Elements of interest internally include the Victoria Safe Company door to a strong room retained to the rear of the ground floor tenancy and three wide metal fire doors and a herringbone strutted timber floor structure which remain in the basement, or lower ground floor space.

History:

The traditional owners of the land in the Launceston region were the North Midlands nation, comprising the Leterremairrener (or Port Dalrymple people), the Panninher (or Norfolk Plains people), the Tyerrernotepanner (or Stoney Creek people) and possibly others (Ryan 2012, p.29). These First Tasmanians traversed and cared for country around kanamaluka/ Tamar estuary for thousands of years before being removed by force following colonisation in the 19th century.

The Gunn family in Launceston (1840–1874)

It was with the arrival of Alexander and Barbara Gunn in 1840, that the family which became the 'Gunn dynasty' established themselves in Launceston. Escaping famine as a crofter come policeman in Caithness, Scotland, and experiencing similar economic misfortune in Adelaide, Alexander finally found work as an overseer of convict punishment at Treadmill Green on the corner of Paterson and Wellington Streets in Launceston (THR #4491). The couple raised six children to adulthood and recognising the need for qualifications (evidently to avoid the hardship they had endured), they secured apprenticeships for their two sons, John, and Thomas, with builder Robert Roe. With Roe, the boys gained experience working on significant buildings in northern Tasmania (including St Mary's Anglican Church in Hagley - THR #12012) and Aotearoa/New Zealand, with John taking leave to fight in the Maori Wars of 1863 (Gunn cited in Lyons 1997, pp.1-4).

It is apparent that John and Thomas learnt a lot from Roe and their time away, including a brief stint building in Sydney, before returning to Launceston to marry sisters Sarah and Mary Morris respectively, and recommencing their trade (Gunn cited in Lyons 1997, pp.1-4). The first record of either Gunn brother entering business for themselves was in 1870 when Thomas began a partnership with John Dean, quickly taking on high profile projects such as Struan (THR #3943), a house built from 1870-71 for James Robertson to a design by Peter Mills and now part of the Supreme Court complex on Cameron Street (*Mercury* 22 April 1870, p.1).

The family company (1875–1986)

From these relatively humble beginnings, the brothers commenced a building partnership which developed rapidly into a vertically integrated construction and supply business including 'sawmills, brickworks, a quarry and sandpit, and hardware supplies' operating extensively across northern Tasmania and extending to Hobart in 1907 (Gunn in Alexander 2006, p.168).

The founding year of the company known as J & T Gunn is widely accepted to be 1875, however the partnership has also been credited with the erection of St Andrew's Anglican Church in Evandale (THR #5018) in 1871, noted as the 'first major work undertaken by Messrs. J. and T. Gunn' (Church records cited in Lyons 1998, p.6). Other sources note the Gunn and Dean partnership as being responsible for the 'brick, stone and plastering work' of St Andrew's (*Examiner* 2 December 1871), but whichever is true, the company built by John and Thomas Gunn grew seemingly exponentially over the next century with the construction of countless houses and many of Launceston and northern Tasmania's most significant buildings and structures to its credit. Some of the most celebrated of these include Launceston's Victorian era Customs House (THR #4202) in 1886 and Albert Hall (part of the City Park Complex THR #11799) in 1891; the outstanding Federation era buildings of Kilmarnock (THR #4178) in 1904, Lemana (now part of at Scotch Oakburn College THR #12033) in 1906, the Commercial Bank of Australia in St John Street ('ANZ Bank' THR #4615) in 1908, and Holy Trinity Church in Cameron Street (THR #3924) in 1910; and embracing changes in scale and construction between the wars, the new Duck Reach Power Station (part of THR #11976) following the 1929 flood, and Holyman House (THR #12097) in 1937, its riveted steel framed construction being a first for Launceston (*Examiner* 2 May 1936, p.9).

The company initially operated out of their Wharf Mill premises, originally at the junction of the North Esk River and kanamaluka/ the Tamar estuary (now 200m inland due to land reclamation between 1910 and 1940), before moving their administration first to a building at 61-63 Brisbane Street in 1875, and then, along with milling and joinery operations, to purpose-built facilities on a larger site in 1881, with these eventually extending from 45 to 53 Brisbane Street. But the company soon outgrew even these premises, and so in 1890 the site across the road at 50 Brisbane Street was purchased to provide suitable office space and showrooms to allow further expansion of the retail business

(Gunn family cited in Lyons 1998, pp.11-18).

While there were downturns in the construction business due to the wars and depressions of the early 20th century, J & T Gunn had earned both an outstanding reputation as a company which produced work of high quality, and took good care of their employees, as demonstrated by the respect shown to the founders by workers following a fire at the Wharf Mill in 1904 (Lyons 1998, pp.10-14). It was with this culture of loyalty and dedication that they continued to grow and diversify as a private company in a number of forms and under a number of names until 1986, and then into the 2000s (mostly as Gunns Limited) after going public.

The original building at 50 Brisbane Street (c.1892–1931)

The land at 50 Brisbane Street was first granted to James Reibey in 1840 (conveyance of title vol.70 fol.27). It was in the ownership of the well-known pastoralist William Field Jnr of Enfield (THR #4741), Bishopsbourne by 1853, and was developed with a cottage, stores, and stables (*Hobart Gazette*, Launceston Assessment Rolls 1853-89). The property was purchased by John and Thomas Gunn in November 1889 (conveyance of title vol.70 fol.27) and by 1894 (*Hobart Gazette*, Launceston Assessment Rolls 1892-4) these structures had been removed to make way for a building of three storeys, including offices and showrooms on both ground and first floor levels, built to John Gunn's design (image: *Weekly Courier* 7 March 1903, p.19). It was a grand structure with an elaborate façade to Brisbane Street in an Italianate style popular in Launceston at the end of Queen Victoria's reign.

Consistent with the classical revivalist styles, the façade was symmetrical, with heavier treatments to the ground floor and window openings varying in shape and becoming smaller with each level above ground, however the pilasters, pediments, brackets, and balustrading were used in a relatively free manner. The building was topped with an elaborately decorated central tower of a more French style which, paired with the decorative and practical water tower standing high above the Gunn's earlier commercial building opposite, would have made a grand statement, demonstrating the status of the company to anyone looking along Brisbane Street at the opening of the 20th century (image: *Weekly Courier* 7 March 1903, p.19). However, this imposing composition would not last long, as a fire that took hold in February 1931 destroyed all but fragments of the ground floor façade (images: *Weekly Courier* 4 February 1931, p.25).

The current building (1931–)

No time was wasted clearing the charred site and commencing the construction of the replacement building as the new premises opened in May of the same year – a demonstration of the skills and resources available to the company. However, the design was modified from that of the original structure, with the scale reduced from three to two storeys, and the replacement of the three dimensional tower with an extended central parapet, reportedly due to the economic downturn of the Great Depression (Gunn cited in Lyons 1998, p.19). This was also an opportunity to alter the ground floor openings, providing an almost fully glazed shopfront to the western side of the showroom, apparently to provide a stronger street presence and window-shopping opportunities (image: *Weekly Courier* 15 July 1931, p.28).

The building was remodelled in 1955, and with the purchase of the adjoining Plaza Theatre (formerly the Academy of Music built by J & T Gunn in 1884) by Gunns in the 1960s and its subsequent conversion into a number of tenancies, the company acquired an additional shopfront for themselves on George Street.

In 1980 Gunns vacated the Brisbane Street premises entirely for a larger site in Cimitiere Street (previously used for their timber operations), to suit their growing retail needs, and the increasing demand for on-site car parking (Lyons 1997, p.21).

The vacant building at 50 Brisbane Street was initially proposed for re-development as a shopping arcade (*Examiner* 19 May 1984) however, developer Robert Hosken had other ideas. By December of 1984, Yorktown Square opened with great fanfare, having according to journalist Martin Flanagan: 'turned backyards into a shopping oasis'.

Several mainland visitors even considered the square had the potential to rival Chatswood or Toorak shopping precincts (*Examiner* 8 December 1984). Yorktown Square hosted the first Banjos bakery in Tasmania and included the refurbishment of 50 Brisbane St, which eventually housed the homewares store, Habitat. Above was the ubiquitous nightclub Twains, part of the Pavilion ('The Pav') public bar and restaurant. Over two decades patrons at Twains danced in a dark room laden with heavy house music, cheap 'early-bird' alcohol and ever-present cigarette smoke. The club was a popular meeting place and rite of passage for many who grew up in the region along with many others from around Tasmania and the further afield who came to Launceston to study at the University of Tasmania and the Australian Maritime College. Many recall it as a safe place to socialise and meet others, with such nightclub scenes pre-dating modern public-liability insurance, online entertainment and dating apps.

Much of the c.1930s interior fittings appear to have been removed with the departure of the Gunn businesses from the

building, however a strong room with its heavy safe door has been retained on the ground floor, and three wide metal fire doors and a timber floor structure survive as part of the lower ground floor space.

The ground floor openings to Brisbane Street were also altered in more recent times (possibly as part of the Yorktown Square development), resulting in the symmetrical façade evident at the time of writing.

References:

Examiner (29 August 1871, 2 December 1871, 17 March 1897, 2 May 1936, 19 May 1984, 8 December 1984)

Gunn, T 'Gunns Ltd', in Alexander, A (ed) 2006, *Companion to Tasmanian History*, Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, University of Tasmania, Hobart.

Hobart Gazette, Launceston Assessment Rolls 1853-94.

Lyons, B 1998, *All Gunns Blazing: J & T Gunn and the Development of Launceston 1871-1997*, Foot and Playsted, Launceston.

Ryan, L 2012, *Tasmanian Aborigines: A History Since 1803*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

State Library of Tasmania, LPIC147-6-310

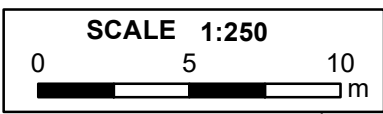
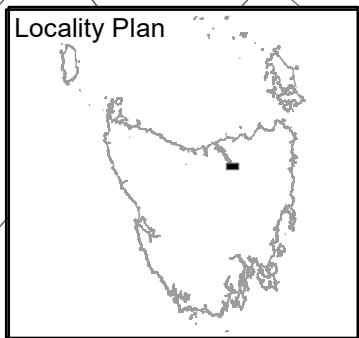
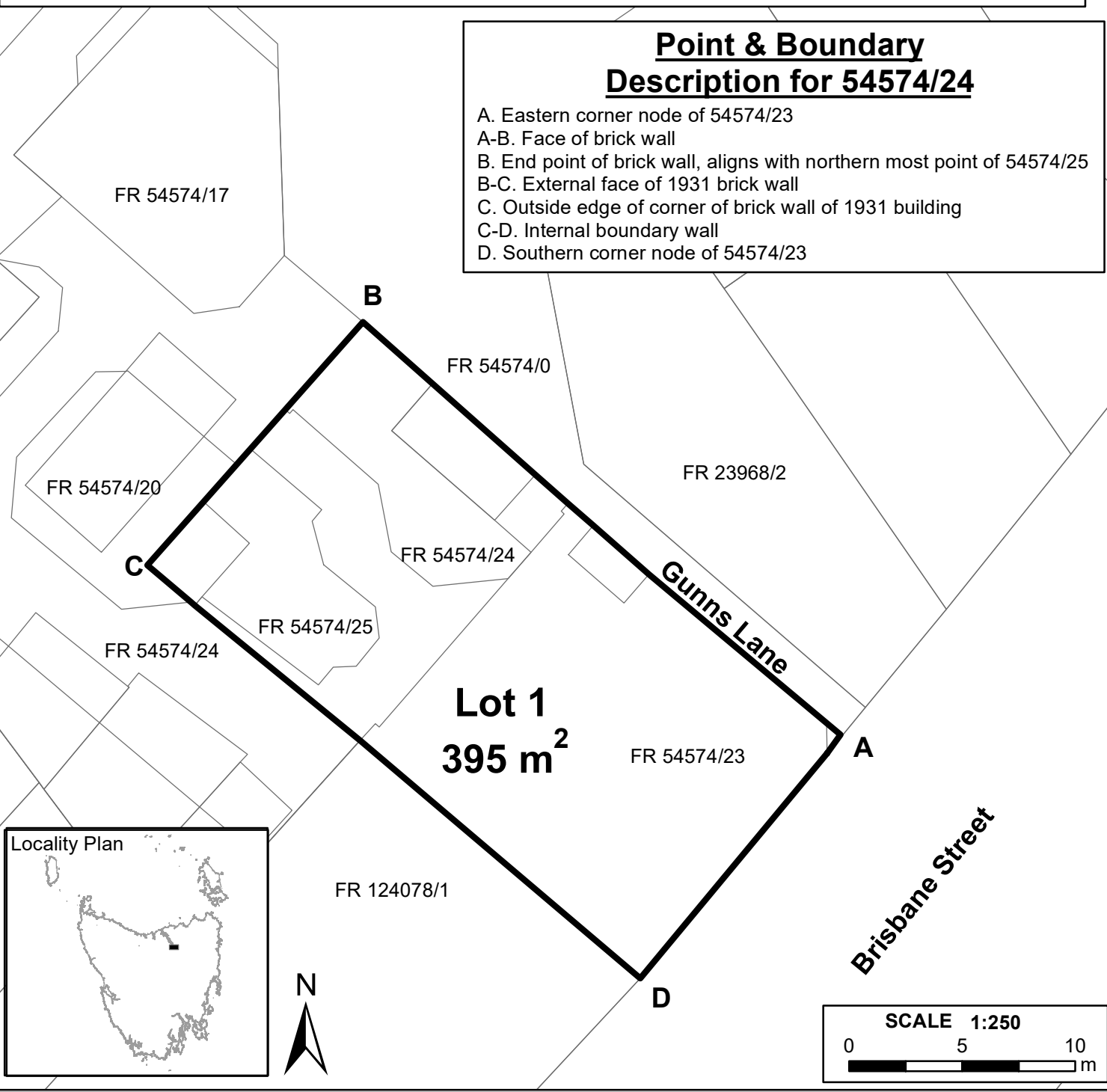
Weekly Courier (7 March 1903, 4 February 1931, 15 July 1931)

Note

1. Lot 1 represents the registered boundary for "J & T Gunn building", #12093 on the Tasmanian Heritage Register.
2. Lot 1 is the whole of parcels FR 54574/23, 54574/25 & the partial parcel of 54574/24, the boundary of which is marked by a heavy black line, details of which can be found in the accompanying datasheet.
3. All boundaries are parcel boundaries unless otherwise stated, details of individual land parcel boundaries may be accessed through the Land Information System Tasmania (LIST).
4. For the purpose of S15(4)(b) of the Historic Cultural Act 1995, this plan replaces the previous boundary in CPR6037 Ref#R3406.

Point & Boundary Description for 54574/24

- A. Eastern corner node of 54574/23
- A-B. Face of brick wall
- B. End point of brick wall, aligns with northern most point of 54574/25
- B-C. External face of 1931 brick wall
- C. Outside edge of corner of brick wall of 1931 building
- C-D. Internal boundary wall
- D. Southern corner node of 54574/23



TASMAP: LAUNCESTON - 5041 GRID: MGA94 / ZONE 55 DATUM: AHD CONTOUR INTERVAL: N/A

No.	PRODUCTION / AMENDMENT	AUTHORITY	REFERENCE	DRAWN	APPROVED	DATE
1	Production	THC	12093	AW	A.ROBERTS	21.12.23



J & T Gunn building
 50 & 50B Brisbane St, 61 George St,
 Launceston

PREPARED BY
 HERITAGE TASMANIA

CENTRAL PLAN REGISTER

p.p. Surveyor General:

Date Registered: 22.12.23

**CPR
 11441**