



The magnificent Werribee Mansion.



Inside the Mansion Hotel.

Victoria's secret

Victorians are rapidly unveiling a forgotten treasure: right on Melbourne's doorstep sits a proud rural community steeped in history and boasting a plethora of world-class attractions. **Claire Deutsher** recently discovered the many marvels around Werribee.

As a kid you might have grown up thinking Werribee was where you would end up if you were ever flushed down the toilet. And you'd have been right. Thankfully a size mismatch between humans (even little ones) and sewerage pipes prevented curious types from making such a journey.

But what you probably didn't learn as a youngster was the role Werribee has played in Victoria's early history and continued to play since. From early European settlement Werribee has played a pivotal role in Victoria's grazing, aviation and surveying history.

Such a diverse past combined with a wide selection of world-class attractions such as the spectacular Open Range Zoo and the award-winning Shadowfax Winery makes a visit to modern Werribee a pleasantly surprising venture of discovery.

Let's start with the magnificent Werribee mansion, the most prominent mark left on the region by Scottish immigrants Thomas

and Andrew Chirnside. The brothers arrived in the area in the early 1840s and established a vast pastoral empire in the Wyndham district, which eventually spanned 82,000 acres (33,000 hectares) of land.

Between 1874 and 1877 the brothers built an opulent Italianate-style mansion to symbolise their impressive wealth. The extravagance of the mansion seemed boundless, featuring pure gold ornamentation throughout the walls and ceiling, frosted glass windows incorporating the Chirnside brothers' motif, and floors tiled by Italian specialists brought to Australia especially for the job.

The mansion was built on 10 hectares and surrounded by perfectly manicured English-style gardens. The Chirnsides entertained the cream of Victorian society with grand balls, dinner parties and picnics.

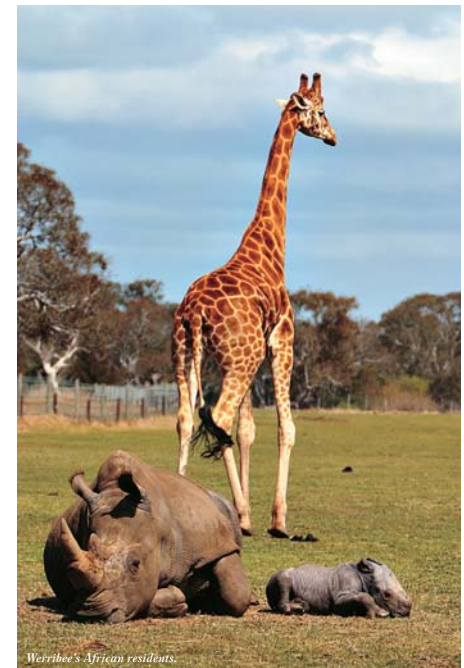
Once the largest private residence in Australia, the mansion was inherited by Andrew's sons following his death in 1890,

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before it was sold to the Catholic Church during the 1920s. It was then used as a seminary until it was sold to the state government in 1973.

While stripping back much of the brilliance the Chirnsides had brought to the mansion, the Catholics added several wings to accommodate their student priests. These sections now form the exquisite Mansion Hotel, a beautiful boutique hotel and conference centre. The ultimate in luxury, the Mansion offers five-star comfort throughout all its superbly appointed guest rooms, complemented with a magnificent fine food and wine menu at the highly acclaimed Joseph's Restaurant. If you tire of the culinary excellence here, you can then treat yourself to a sheer-indulgence package at the day spa.

The actual residence of the mansion has since undergone an extensive restoration and returned to the splendour of its early



Werribee's African residents.

glory days, with great care taken to ensure the mansion accurately replicates its original form.

Added to its various roles through its history, the majesty of the mansion has captured the imagination of many film producers and it has featured in television series and movies including *Carson's Law*, *ANZACS* and *The Pirate Movie*.

Visitors to the mansion these days can step back in time and gain a rare insight into 1870s life and observe the stark contrast between privileged living and servant lifestyle. In yet another symbol of extravagance, the mansion was technologically advanced for its time, fitted with gas lights and the ensuite in Andrew and his wife Mary's bedroom even had a flushing toilet. While the residential areas of the mansion ooze luxury, the working areas of the house are completely devoid of 'niceties' and are merely fitted with the bare minimum of facilities for serving the Chirnsides. Perhaps the only suggestion of excessiveness in this area of the house is the butler's room, used for keeping the silverware behind lock and key.

And while it's been almost a century since any Chirnsides occupied the mansion, their legacy remains, with ghosts rumoured to inhabit the grand old building. Guided tours of the mansion are available, however visitors can also explore its splendour in their own time with the aid of an audio headset tour.

Once you've enjoyed the best of the mansion, a short stroll across the grounds will lead you to contemporary boutique winery Shadowfax. The winery was established in 1999 and winemaker Matt Harrop has developed a reputation for his superior wines made from grapes sourced from vineyards across Victoria and the Barossa Valley.

The cellar door provides a warm, inviting ambience complete with a selection of gourmet foods in the recently added café, so you'll feel well accommodated sampling Harrop's impressive range of vinos, including his award-winning 2004 chardonnay. Many of the wines are excellent for cellaring (if you can make them last that long) and friendly and knowledgeable staff are

on hand to explain the characteristics of each vintage so you walk out armed with a healthy addition to your wine collection.

Historic mansions, day-spas and quality wine – and you still haven't left the Werribee Park precinct. What's more, there's much more to explore. The Werribee Open Range Zoo is home to a fabulous collection of African, Asian, North American and Australian animals. Visitors are permitted a rare opportunity to observe exceptional wildlife roaming free among habitat closely resembling their own native land. Regular safari tours escort visitors around the property, bringing them within metres of giraffes, hippopotamuses, rhinoceroses, camels, antelopes, zebras and many more. Then, by foot, you can follow your way down the path to Africa. Passing a Botswana village and family of monkeys along the way, you'll come across Werribee's big cats, including two lions, three felines and a couple of cheetahs.

Although it houses animals from all continents, there is a particularly African feel to the zoo. The African flora copes well with the Australian conditions, while Werribee's open plains closely mimic the savannahs of Africa. There is a range of different tours you can experience at the zoo, such as the Rip Roaring Lion Feed or the Raising Rhino tour, allowing you to observe the natural behaviours of these grand creatures. And in the warmer months you can even sleep over at the zoo with the Safari Slumber, which provides a complete African experience including native music, food and drinks. There's so much to explore at Werribee Zoo you can easily spend a whole day there. Regardless of how long your visit, conclude your venture at the memorable Meerkat café, where you can enjoy a fly-on-the-wall experience observing these comical and highly social little creatures carrying out their daily routines as you sip your latte.

Yet, Werribee's intrigue doesn't end there. Just down the road is the first-rate Sanctuary Lakes Resort, boasting a range of cutting-edge facilities. The clubhouse is open to the public and available for lunch and dinner, providing a spectacular

view over the magnificent Greg Norman designed golf course.

Widening its appeal to the corporate market, Quest Apartments will open at Sanctuary Lakes at the end of 2006.

Sanctuary Lakes Resort is also popular with bird lovers, with the Cheetham wetlands bird sanctuary right on its doorstep. Comprising 420 hectares of artificial lagoons and a natural lagoon, the sanctuary is home to significant populations of rare migratory birds as well as a spectacular variety of indigenous birds and is now protected in recognition of its environmental significance as a breeding habitat for rare migratory birds.

The Werribee region has also played a vital part in Australia's aviation history, with land at Point Cook selected as a training base in 1913 and becoming the birthplace of the Royal Australian

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The stunning Sanctuary Lakes clubhouse is open to the public.

Air Force. Point Cook was used for training in both world wars and continued as the RAAF training academy until 1992, and is now the RAAF museum. And Werribee's dedication to conservation of military aviation artefacts goes on. An enthusiastic group of volunteers, some who actually flew the planes, are busily restoring a B-24 Liberator in a Second World War hangar on the old Werribee airfield.

The B-24 played a vital role in the Second World War, and in fact, upon surrendering, the Japanese credited the B-24 as being a major cause for their defeat. Most B-24 Liberators were scrapped following the war and now just eight remain in the world. The B-24 Liberator Memorial Fund has acquired around 90 per cent of the airframe and 70 per cent of its furniture and fittings and it is their intention to restore the plane to its fully operational status.

The meticulous restoration of the B-24 provides a unique opportunity to get up close and personal with an important constituent of Second World War artillery. Visitors can poke their head inside the tough fighter plane, which was able to carry four tonnes of bombs and travel more than 4500 kilometres before

refuelling, and gain an appreciation for the logistics of the aircraft and the conditions soldiers endured. With no insulation in the aircraft, aside from the very real risk of being shot out of the sky during combat, there was also a strong threat crew would freeze to death in these planes.

These are just some of the many highlights Werribee boasts these days. Even the Werribee Treatment Plant, once considered Werribee's most famous landmark and the butt of many jokes, is now respected as a world leader in the development of environmentally friendly sewage treatment processes.

With so much to offer just 25 minutes from Melbourne's CBD, it's well worth making a day or even a weekend trip to Werribee. **W**

OTHER THINGS TO SEE AND DO AROUND WERRIBEE:

- **Essence Food Studio** – Established by celebrity chef Bart Beek, Essence Food Studio is a fun and unique way to enjoy quality cuisine. Bart, with his wife Alaine Stoka, runs a variety of gourmet cooking presentations with live music and concerts. One show, 'What was that?' combines cooking with live theatre at the Werribee mansion. To experience one of Bart's cooking presentations or attend the theatre, contact Essence Food Studio on (03) 9742 3068.

- **National Equestrian Centre** – A world-class equestrian facility situated at Werribee Park.

- **Point Cook Homestead** – The original home of the wealthy Chirnside family, visitors can explore its grounds overlooking the bay.

- **Victoria State Rose Garden** – Situated among the vast gardens at Werribee mansion, the Victoria State Rose Garden boasts over 4500 rose bushes which blossom into a spectacular array of roses of all colours between November and April.

- **South Base Stone** – In 1860 Werribee became the southern point for the inaugural Geodetic Survey of Victoria, which for the first time enabled the distance and location of natural and artificial features to be accurately calculated and therefore shown on maps. At the starting point of this line a solid stone was set in the ground which is known as the South Base Stone.



The cellar door at Shadowfax Winery.