

A History of Wyreena



Wyreena Community Arts Centre: Its Origins and Significance

Traditional custodians of the land

Before European colonisation, the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung People of the Kulin Nation were the traditional custodians of the land now known as the City of Maroondah for more than 35,000 years. The Croydon district flats was an area prized for hunting both before and in the early days of European colonisation.

▼ Early European occupation and orcharding

The first European squatter in the area was William Turner, who established a cattle station in 1837. The suburb of Croydon established a railway station in 1882, and its current name in 1884.

That same year, William Turner's son, Hector, purchased 15 acres east of Dorset Road and north-west of Hull Road from the Crown for £16. In 1886 he sold the land to South Melbourne greengrocers Sophie Wilson and Annie Hayton, and they established fruit orchards. By this time Croydon and Ringwood were two of Victoria's finest fruit growing districts, producing apples, pears, stone fruits and berries. By the end of the nineteenth century, fruit growers Annie and Solomon Hayton, lived in a house called Holmwood. It was located near today's Glamis Court.



The Haytons remained on the property until 1914, when they sold it to another fruit grower, Douglas Lilley. His wife opened Holmwood house to guests, advertising its 'magnificent views' and 'asphalt tennis court'. After the Lilleys sold in 1918 to John Percy Jones, Holmwood continued to be run as a guesthouse, by the Leddin sisters. One of the many families who stayed at Holmwood guesthouse were the Catomores, inspiring an affection for the area. The guesthouse was demolished in 1947.

*Plan of the 15 acres Hector Turner purchased in 1884.
Dorset Road is to the west and Hull Road to the south-east.*

▼ Holmwood Estate

While orcharding continued in the Croydon area until the 1990s, it began to wane after World War I, gradually replaced by residential subdivisions.

John Percy Jones, a Labor Party member of Victoria's Parliament, lived at his country mansion, Ruskin Park, from 1911 until 1921. As a speculative venture he purchased the 15 acres to the south of his mansion, where Holmwood guesthouse and cherry orchards were located. Jones then subdivided the land into suburban blocks to create Holmwood Estate, advertised as 'Croydon's Sensational Subdivision', on 'High and Dry' land overlooking the Croydon township.

The very first purchaser of land in Holmwood Estate was Beryl Catomore, who bought seven allotments fronting Hull Road in December 1920, followed by another 12 allotments to their north in January 1921. Together, these 19 allotments totalled about four acres and form the grounds of today's Wyreena Community Arts Centre.

▼ Construction of Hayward

At the time of the purchase, Beryl Catomore lived in East St Kilda with her husband, Charles a travelling salesman, and their three children. When Charles retired in 1922, they moved to Croydon. At first they lived in a weekender on the south-eastern corner of Hull and Dorset roads, while organising the construction of a new house on the Holmwood Estate land.

The house, designed by architectural practice Hudson & Wardrop, was named Hayward (later renamed Wyreena). Philip Hudson was a friend of the family. At the time they were commissioned to design Hayward, around 1922, Hudson & Wardrop were about to become famous. Returned servicemen, Philip B Hudson and James H Wardrop formed a partnership in 1920. In July 1922, two design competitions were announced: for the St Kilda Memorial Hall, and for the Shrine of Remembrance. In October 1922, Hudson & Wardrop were proclaimed the winners of the first competition, and in December 1923, the second.



Charles Stewart Lionel Catomore
(1873 -1958)



Beryl Edith Catomore (nee King)
(1879 -1966)

Portraits of Charles and Beryl Catomore, around the time of their wedding in 1903.



Hayward/Wyrena in its original form, prior to enclosure of the balcony and construction of the Conservatory Café.

While these two memorial buildings relied on classical architecture traditions, Philip Hudson was also well-known for his residential designs drawing upon English Domestic Revival and California Bungalow styles. His design for Hayward is an excellent example of a two-storey bungalow with strong American architectural influences. Facing east, toward Worrall Street, its principal façade features a large timber-shingled gable supported by heavy clinker-brick piers. The first-floor balcony (since enclosed) and the first-floor walls are finished in roughcast render. The strong lines and the use of natural materials and textures to create visual interest are characteristic of interwar bungalows, and were a reaction to the extensive use of applied ornament during the Victorian and Edwardian periods.

The Catomores hired a gardener to establish and maintain a formal garden around the house on the southern half of the site. The property was largely self-sufficient, with a stable, poultry sheds, and a cow paddock occupying the northern half of the site. There was a tennis court along the Worrall Street boundary, and a swimming pool was built around 1930.

The family soon became an important part of the local community. In 1926, the Croydon District Golf Club was formed and Charles was one of the inaugural Directors. Both Charles and Beryl played regularly and were active in the running of the Golf Club and the local Tennis Club; their children were also members. Beryl was one of a group of women who sought the creation of the Croydon Baby Health Centre.

Construction of Silver Birches

The Catomore's eldest daughter, Hilma, announced her engagement to J L Noel Benjamin in November 1928. Noel Benjamin grew up in Croydon, but had moved to East St Kilda by this time. He qualified as a barrister and solicitor shortly before the wedding in April 1930. It was held at St John's Church of England, Croydon, with the reception at Hayward.

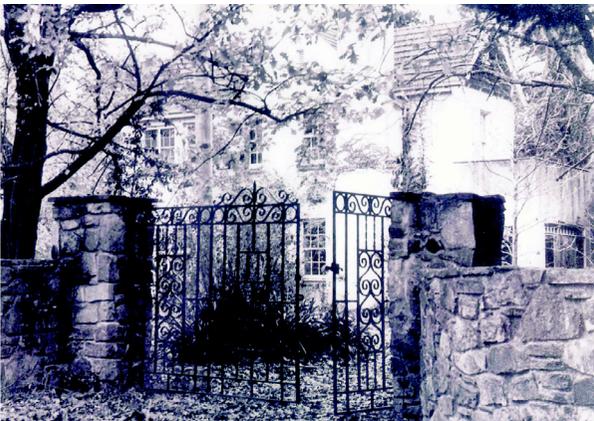
Three months before the wedding, Beryl Catomore transferred the northern half of the property to her daughter. The groom's family contributed by extending a mortgage to finance construction of a house on this land known as Silver Birches.

Silver Birches faces east to Worrall Street. It bears a "family" resemblance to Hayward, with timber shingles in gables, textured render on the walls, clinker brick accents, and a terracotta tiled roof. In keeping with its later date, however, this is not a bungalow, but an elegant example of the English Domestic Revival style. The style draws on medieval English precedents, such as steeply pitched gabled roofs, often with sheer walls unprotected by eaves, multi-pane windows, and picturesque asymmetry emphasised by the large external front chimney. The style expressed the solidity and longevity of British traditions.

The entire family left the site in the 1940s. In 1944, Beryl and Charles Catomore sold Hayward to Elsa Mary Grice, who renamed the house Wyreana. They moved to the Sunnydale guesthouse on nearby Dorset Road. In 1945, Hilma and Noel sold Silver Birches to Stanley and Gwendolyn Gordon, and moved with their three daughters to Hartwell. At that same time, they changed the family surname from Benjamin to Cooke, which was the maiden name of Noel's mother.



Hilma Catomore and Noel Benjamin/Cooke around the time of their marriage, c1930.



Silver Birches beyond its original Worrall Street entry gates.



Aerial view of Hayward and Silver Birches in their gardens in 1951.

▼ Our Lady of the Sacred Heart

In June 1953 the Catholic order, the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, purchased Hayward/Wyreena to serve as their convent. The nuns had been invited to Croydon to teach at St Edmund's School. The large entry hall served as a music teaching room, while the former dining room beside it became a chapel where mass was celebrated every morning. They slept in the bedrooms upstairs.

In 1961 the nuns were able to purchase Silver Birches, removing the intervening fence and reuniting the two houses once again. Silver Birches became a Business College for girls. The business skills course ran for two years, and included subjects such as religion, shorthand theory, typewriting, commercial practice and principles, English and arithmetic. Cooking and needlework were optional extras. The nuns are remembered fondly by their students and by local residents who were invited each year to see Christmas decorations.

▼ To the rescue

The Business College closed by the mid-1970s, and the entire site was put up for sale in 1976. The property appealed both to developers and to local community activists and arts organisations. The developers planned to demolish the two old houses, pull out most of the trees, and erect 30 new townhouses. The community groups and a few City of Croydon councillors saw it as the perfect place for an arts centre. There was resistance to this idea from other Croydon councillors, who wished to see a modern arts facility built at the Croydon Leisure Centre. Developer Shelby Investments made an offer for the site, which was accepted.

Before the property transfer settled, however, local activists and interested councillors continued to work behind the scenes, gathering signatures on petitions, and inviting Premier Rupert Hamer to visit the site. Hamer, who was well known for his support of the arts and heritage, reportedly said after seeing it that the place would be demolished over his dead body, and offered to provide matching State government funding for the purchase if the Council covered the rest.

This proved to be a turning point, and a majority of Croydon councillors voted to accept the offer, and negotiated with Shelby Investments to purchase the site for \$360,000. The property transfer was not without bad blood, and employees of the developer chopped down and burned mature trees when they heard the State government was stepping in. The wrought-iron entrance gates to Silver Birches also disappeared. The land was transferred to the Mayor, Councillors and Citizens of the City of Croydon on 8 December 1977.

▼ Wyreena Community Arts Centre

The two houses, Wyreena (formerly Hayward) and Silver Birches and the extensive grounds they share were adapted for use as an arts and community centre, which opened in March 1978. Wyreena offers a wide range arts programs, workshops, exhibitions and special events for all ages and abilities.

New facilities were added to the site for new needs. These included the installation in 1990 of portable buildings to house a local radio station and a community hall (named after the Catomore family). The old stables served for many years as a pottery studio, until it was replaced with a new building in 2002. Floor area of Wyreena house was expanded by enclosing the first-floor balcony on the east side, and later constructing the Conservatory Café below it.

In the garden, an Adventure Playground opened in 1998. It was followed by the hugely popular PlaySpace in 2016, which was designed in consultation with local children.

In 2023, the original Hayward/Wyreena house reached its 100 year anniversary.



Wyreena is proudly owned and operated by Maroondah City Council for the community to enjoy.



Wyreena today, image by Andy Drewitt

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