

Welcome to Pirra Mansion...

the elegant old lady of Lara



Bisinella
the key to your community

A Brief History

- 1856 Robert De Little, an architect and builder from Launceston, purchases the original Pirra landholdings at a Crown land auction in Geelong.
- 1863 George Fairbairn senior, one of Australia's most prosperous pastoralists, later to become one of the pioneers of Australia's frozen meat export trade, purchased the Pirra landholdings from De Little and established a sheep station.
- The Fairbairn family owned, expanded and farmed the property until 1907. The property nearly trebled in size to 3389 acres over this period.
- The homestead was originally known as "Woodlands" and the location as Duck Ponds. By 1880 the name of the property had changed to "Windermere" and the location to Lara.
- On the death of George Fairbairn senior in 1895, Pirra was inherited by his son George Fairbairn junior and wife Jessie. They lived in Toorak and used Pirra as their getaway. Social life at Pirra, including cricket, croquet and tennis, flourished at this time.
- 1907 The Pirra landholdings were sold to the Government in accordance with the Closer Settlement Act of 1904. The Lara Inebriates Institution was established by Order-in-Council dated 21 June 1907 on 637 acres of the Fairbairn estate including the homestead, outbuildings and gardens. The institution operated until 1930.
- 1938 Pirra was sold to James Dougal McDonald of Euroa. He grew crops and ran sheep. The McDonald family lived in the mansion.
- 1946 McDonald leased the former Inebriates Dormitory to the States Tobacco Company for use as a tobacco processing factory. The factory closed two years later.

- 1948 Oscar and Edna Mendelsohn purchased the property and renamed it “Serendip”, meaning “happy place”. A Pelaco clothing factory replaced the tobacco factory. A commercial almond orchard was established and the large water reservoir was proclaimed a sanctuary for protection of birdlife.
- 1959 The 600 acres surrounding the water reservoir was sold to the State Department of Fisheries and Wildlife. This is now Serendip Sanctuary. The remaining 37 acre homestead was taken over by the Social Welfare Department.
- 1961 The Pirra Girls’ Home was established in the mansion house and nearby buildings – and the property soon became known simply as “Pirra”.
- 1983 The Pirra Girls’ Home was closed and the property leased to Rex Keogh and Geoff Dombrain. They established accommodation for themselves and invited artists.
- 1996 The property, now 16.4 acres, was sold to Rex Keogh. He continued to use it as a home for artists and as special community-based accommodation for a limited number of people with disabilities.
- 2006 Pirra was purchased by Lara businessman Lino Bisinella with plans to restore the mansion house to its former glory.
- 2012 The restoration project, undertaken in close consultation with Heritage Victoria and costing well over \$2 million, was completed.

The Renovation

Bisinella Developments purchased Pirra in 2006 to ensure that the historic homestead was preserved and protected for the Lara community. Between 2007 and early 2012, the company spent well over \$2 million repairing and renovating the property under the guidance of Heritage Victoria. It is one of several heritage restoration projects undertaken by Bisinella Developments in Lara.

The two storey Pirra mansion house was designed by the prolific architectural firm Alexander Davidson and Co. The Victorian Eclectic house style, with several highly unusual French mediaeval decorative features, is an important example of the work of the Davidson practice. The mansion has been fully renovated and restored to its original style. The iconic balcony presented a significant challenge. Rotten timber beams, caused mainly by poor drainage, made the entire balcony structure unsafe.

When purchased by Bisinella Developments, the mansion's four large front rooms - two downstairs and two upstairs - retained their original architraves, cornices and solid plaster skirting, though they were in need of major repair. The wall coverings had been changed many times over the years and no original light fittings remained. The original marble fireplaces in the downstairs rooms were intact, but the upstairs fireplaces had been removed. Extensive work was required to repair significant cracking in the plaster, architraves and cornices. A specialist trade was brought in to fix damage caused by wear and tear to the plaster skirting. New wall coverings and light fittings – carefully chosen to match the style of the original - were installed. The tiles in the downstairs fireplaces were removed, cleaned and reinstalled. Replacement tiles, where necessary, were custom made. New marble fireplaces were installed upstairs, matching the originals as closely as possible.