



MOUNT WILLIAM

WILLAURA



MOUNT WILLIAM



When Major Thomas Mitchell—a stout native of Stirlingshire in Scotland—climbed to the highest point in the Grampians mountain range his choice of name for the 1,168-metre peak was obvious; he named it Mount William after King William IV of England. This was in 1837 and Mitchell was exploring the Murray–Darling river system all the way through Victoria and New South Wales, having started his journey in Sydney in 1836.

Two years later brothers Thomas and Andrew Chirside arrived in Port Phillip from Scotland. In 1842 they pitched their tents to the east of Mount William and saw great potential in the land surrounding them. The brothers had little capital but good experience of small-scale farming in Scotland. They bought sheep in the Riverina and soon established *Mount William* station.

Mount William's location at the foot of the Grampians, with its spectacular river red gums, made it one of the brothers' most treasured holdings. They built a six-bedroom homestead out of stone and in 1862, after the government granted them freehold ownership, erected a 20-stand woolshed that was later heritage listed. They built a sheep-wash in the nearby creek. This consisted of long wooden troughs through which jets of water were pumped from the creek and the sheep-wash itself, which could hold fifty sheep. The water had to be heated before the sheep were put into it, to dissolve the arsenic and sulphur.

In its prime more than 100,000 sheep were hand-shorn at *Mount William*, producing around 800 bales of wool. In the 1870s the run was leased to Andrew Chirside's two sons—Andrew and Robert—and by 1890 the freehold of *Mount William* was nearly 57,000 acres (23,000 hectares). It was part of an impressive string of stations owned by the family, including *Mokanger*, *Kenilworth South*, *Wardy Yallock*, *Curnong*, *Carranballac*, *Mount Elephant*, *Koort Koort-Nong* and *Werribee Park*.

Below: (left to right) Sybil Abbott-Burmeister, Scarlett Burmeister, Matthew Burmeister, Floyd Burmeister, Sinclair Burmeister, Victoria Abbott, Robert Abbott

Opposite: The woolshed, built by the Chirside family in 1862, is now heritage listed.

Mount William, 15 kilometres north-west of Willaura, was among the first of the large pastoral properties to make land available for cultivation to share farmers and tenant farmers. In the winter of 1897 the trustees of (the young) Andrew Chirside's estate asked the manager of *Mount William*, George Hesketh, to arrange blocks of 100–300 acres (40–120 hectares) to be farmed. Bank failures had led to tough times and there was a long list of applicants. Soon 10,000 acres (4,050 hectares) were taken up and eight-horse teams were seen ploughing the land. Before long, wheat was growing, heralding the start of a local industry which would prosper for decades.

The turn of the century saw thousands of men catch the train to Willaura (the Premier, Thomas Bent, offered free train tickets to the unemployed) and traipse across the *Mount William* paddocks to the Grampians goldfields. The fields were damaged and the streams polluted with tailings from the gold mines. Desperate men called in at the homestead, searching for food and shelter. Hesketh even provided rooms for a team of policemen until they could find permanent accommodation. Although the gold rush was short-lived, the town of Willaura grew considerably.

By this time more than sixty tenants were leasing land at *Mount William*, paying 10–13 shillings per acre. Many agitated to be able to buy the land, and an auction held in 1906 allowed many to do this. Twenty thousand acres (8,100 hectares), including the homestead and woolshed, were kept aside for Russell Chirside, who had professed an interest in wool growing and sheep breeding. He spent some time at *Mount William* but eventually decided to settle at *Carranballac*. *Mount William* was eventually sold to William Philip from Hamilton.





Opposite: Polo is played at Mount William twice a year.

In 1919 the property, then 20,000 acres (8,093 hectares), was bought by Robert Barr Smith of Adelaide, who had recently returned from the Western Front, where he had served with the 1st Life Guards. Barr Smith was looking to move away from the hustle and bustle of Adelaide and considered *Decameron* near Avoca before buying *Mount William*. He was drawn to the isolation as well as the dense red gum country and its undulating terrain, which sloped in the centre to a large swamp. They were still tough times. Not long after Barr Smith bought the property, one of his workers put his hand down a rabbit hole and was bitten by a snake. He chopped his finger off with a knife and nearly bled to death.

In 1920 a fire destroyed the homestead so Barr Smith's indefatigable wife—the straight-backed Russian-born Eda—set to work rebuilding the house (Spanish style with a terracotta roof) and built a garden to match. Eventually, three full-time gardeners were required to look after the many flowerbeds, the large kitchen garden and the orchard.

Barr Smith cleared and ploughed the ground and sowed the land with English grasses and clovers. During the 1920s more than 2,000 acres (810 hectares) were ploughed up and dead timber





Opposite, top:
The stables



was cleared and burned off, dramatically increasing the property's carrying capacity.

When Robert and Eda Barr Smith retired to *Delamere* at Dromana on the Mornington Peninsula, *Mount William* passed to their son, Robert Mitchell Barr Smith, and his wife Elizabeth. They in turn had four daughters. The property continued running fine-wool Merino sheep, cattle and cropping. In the 1960s, on a visit to Mexico, Barr Smith was impressed with Charolais cattle doing well in arid conditions and he decided to pursue Charolais cattle at *Mount William*. In 1969 he was among the first cattle breeders to import Charolais semen into Australia, which he used to inseminate his Friesian, Shorthorn and Angus cows. Within eight years he had a pure Charolais herd and *Mount William* became one of the leading Charolais studs in the country.

One of the loyal employees at *Mount William* was gardener Sergie Tognon, who arrived from Italy aged sixteen. He worked for the Barr Smiths for forty-seven years, cutting hedges and mowing lawns by hand for many years before a ride-on mower was bought. He also share-farmed parts of *Mount William*. Elizabeth Barr Smith gave Tognon morning tea at 10am sharp, signalled by the ringing of a bell, lunch at noon and afternoon tea at 3pm. Tognon ended up marrying a local girl, Doris White, who gained local fame for winning the 'world rabbit-skinning competition', held at Moyston. Today a plaque dedicated to Tognon's work sits in the rose garden.

In 1985 Barr Smith divided *Mount William's* 15,000 acres (6,075 hectares) between his four daughters. The homestead and 3,200 acres (1,296 hectares) went to the second-oldest of them, Anne Cochran, who, together with Charles Abbott, bought land from two of her sisters and a neighbour, which took the property to 7,200 acres (2,900 hectares).

'I remember my grandfather well,' Anne Cochran says. 'He was a quiet man. Most of his family were in South Australia and when he returned from the war he wanted peace and quiet.

Before *Mount William* passed to my father we lived at *Serra*, which was part of *Mount William*, and which my father ran until we moved into the main homestead. As children we rode ponies and had a governess called Miss Carey, who tried to be strict, but we always ran away and jumped on the horses. Eventually we went away to boarding school. When my father divided up *Mount William* between the four of us, he did it in a very fair way.'

Anne and Charles Abbott ran *Mount William* together from 1987 to 1995, after which Anne ran it successfully for more than fifteen years. 'It was a little daunting. I was responsible for 12,000 fine-wool Merinos and 200 Charolais breeders. I had travelled a bit and completed a nursing degree at Melbourne's Alfred Hospital, but I was a little unprepared for running the station. It was hard for a woman to farm then because it was very much a man's world. People would try to pull the wool over my eyes. I had to learn quickly.' She pays great credit to livestock consultant Bryce Galvin, who assisted greatly with the Charolais stud.

The *Mount William* stables underwent a major renovation in 1988 and the last decade has seen the garden simplified significantly. A kitchen garden of raised beds from bluestone was built. The garden is home to a large cedar of Lebanon, a palm tree and a large lime. The rose garden is as prolific as ever and four lindens remain in good health, planted by Robert and Elizabeth Barr Smith to mark the birth of each of their daughters.

In February 2006 a bushfire started on Mount Lubra in the Grampians and burned 80 per cent of *Mount William*, including 200 sheep, 56 kilometres of fencing and \$50,000 worth of hay. The fire burned for two weeks, destroying 320,000 acres (130,000 hectares), including half of the Grampians.

In 2016 Anne Cochran divided *Mount William* between her four children—Sybil, Robert, James and William. Daughter Sybil with husband Matthew and their three children—Scarlett, Floyd and Sinclair—own the Gurner's Lane Block (named after the 1982



Above: Every February Mount William conducts a bull and heifer sale.

Top, right: Siblings William Abbott, James Abbott, Robert Abbott, Sybil Abbott-Burmeister.



Melbourne Cup winner) and some swamp country. They run a composite ewe flock, producing prime lambs and lambs for sale. They supplement that with a small herd of Angus breeders, and also produce hay for home and for sale.

Robert and his wife Victoria—with sons Hugo and Rupert—run the Charolais stud, achieving record prices for bulls in Victoria. They have increased the herd size to 300 breeders. They also run a small Merino flock and sell hay on the side. James lives in Sydney, and owns a picturesque block of land that overlooks the Grampians, which he subleases to Sybil and Matthew.

Meanwhile William has returned to *Mount William* after twelve years in banking in Shanghai. He has converted the homestead and shearers' quarters into a tourism and events destination, leasing his land to brother Robert.

'All four children have always had a very special love for *Mount William*, which has been in the Barr Smith family for a hundred years,' Anne Cochran says. 'They are engaged in their separate enterprises, both on and off the farm. It's delightful that they, and their children—the fifth generation at *Mount William*—remain close and connected.'

