

Alton (H0874) was designed and constructed between 1874 and 1896 by Sir George Verdon as his hill-side retreat from the heat of summer. After his death in 1896 it had several owners before it was purchased in 1929 by George Nicholas, co-founder of the Aspro empire. The Nicholas family owned Alton until July 1990, when it was sold to Silver Meadows Pty. Ltd.

### Colonial Hill Station

Alton is a significant nineteenth century example of a retreat built in the tradition of a colonial 'hill station'. The property included picturesque gardens, farm land and sporting recreational facilities in addition to the main house. It is one of a few nineteenth century 'hill stations' to survive in Victoria. A number in the Mount Macedon area have been destroyed in fires, the most devastating being the 1983 Ash Wednesday fire. Terraced hill stations were often associated with Indian settlements such as Darjeeling and Simla, particularly in the nineteenth century. The characteristics of hill stations seen at Alton include an elevated location, steeply terraced gardens with unusual exotic cool temperate plantings and picturesque buildings.

### Hung Wall Tiling

The use of hung wall tiling at Alton is particularly early in Victoria and Australia and may possibly be the first of its kind. It reflects the use of this wall treatment in England by the architects Nesfield and Shaw from the 1860s. The tiles were manufactured in Malvern, whereas many later examples were imported from England. Seven years after the use of the tiles at Alton, the *Australasian* in 1889 exclaimed that the first use in the colony of the "exterior of the walls being hung with red tiles especially imported from England" was a large residence to the design of Oakden, Addison and Kemp for Dr. Thomas Rowan in Alton Road. Plain and scalloped hung tiles similar to Alton's were also used on Caerleon, Bellevue Hill, Sydney. Caerleon's construction began in 1885 to the design of Maurice B Adams, the editor of the English journal *Building News*.



*Tennis court*



*Front view of Alton*

### Arts and Crafts Movement, Old English style

Alton is an important Australian example of the arts and crafts movement. It is also the best surviving example of an Old English style building in Australia, especially in its use of hung wall tiles and its staged construction.

### Historical significance

Alton is historically important for its association with Sir George Verdon, a prominent and influential Melbourne businessman, politician, art patron and gentleman scientist during the second half of the nineteenth century. He was the architect of the house. Although not trained in this area he showed a keen interest in the field and became one of only two laymen to have been a member of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects throughout its history.

### Australian timbers

Verdon was an early proponent of Federation, moving a motion advocating the Federation of the colonies at the 1863 international conference. Verdon's patriotism is reflected in the motifs in the stained glass windows and in the Australian timber theme used in the interior. The use of Australasian timbers in the interior of Alton is possibly the earliest example in Victoria.

The second prominent owner of Alton from 1929 until his death in 1960 was George Nicholas, co-founder of the Nicholas Company which developed the famous Aspro formula. The property remained in the Nicholas family's ownership until 1990.

### Garden design

The estate shows George Nicholas's influence in the garden structures and the outbuildings. Alton's significant garden design still reflects Verdon's vision but overlaid with the terracing, paths, pergola, pond with islands, croquet lawn, a tennis court built into the hillside and other garden structures from the Nicholas era. It achieves a balance between landscaped areas, working areas and paddocks and the natural bush settings. Remains of the once large vegetable garden and glasshouses can be seen. A rare glasshouse built for the cultivation of table grapes (a "vinery") and planted with grapes, citrus and display shelving for orchids survives in the working area.



*Glasshouse, interior*

The garden is planted with many rare and unusual plants: it contains a large collection of New Zealand natives and northern hemisphere trees and shrubs. Conifers dominate the garden - many are outstanding for their size and form. The conifer collection is the finest in Victoria, and one of the most important in Australia. It is only matched by 'Forest Lodge' in the Adelaide Hills and the Royal Tasmanian Botanic Gardens in Hobart.



*Garden Stairs*

Beneath are stands of rhododendrons and azaleas, and down the hillside below the Monkey Puzzle is a "river" of Mollis Azaleas. The beds are planted with many different bulbs, ferns and woodland species from North America.

Almost every view of Alton is dominated by mature trees, which are often the finest of their species in Victoria. Below are the trees at Alton which are listed in the National Trust's *Register of Significant Trees*, with Heritage Victoria's comments on their heritage significance.

Botanical Name	Common Name	Location	Significance
ABIES GRANDIS	GIANT FIR	West of cottage	Rare, largest, finest in Victoria
ABIES PINSAPO	SPANISH FIR	West of cottage	
ACER RUBRUM	RED MAPLE	South of tennis court	Largest in Victoria
ARAUCARIA ARAUCANA	MONKEY PUZZLE	South section of garden in azalea be	Finest in Victoria
DAPHNIPHYLLUM MACROPODUM		North of path to croquet lawn	Only example in Victoria
LARIX DECIDUA	EUROPEAN LARCH	S-W of tennis court	Outstanding
NESTEGIS MONTANA	ORO ORO	S-E of tennis court near path	Only one in Victoria
PICEA ABIES	NORWAY SPRUCE	N-W of main house	
PICEA SITCHENSIS	SITKA SPRUCE	South of tennis court beside central path	Largest in Victoria
PICEA SITCHENSIS	SITKA SPRUCE	Near entrance gate north of croquet lawn	
PSEUDOPANAX CRASSIFOLIUS	LANCEWOOD	South section of garden in New Zealand	Rare
SEQUIADENDRON GIGANTEUM	SIERRA REDGUM	N-W of main house	A fine tree
SEQUIADENDRON GIGANTEUM	SIERRA REDWOOD	S-E of tennis court in shrubbery	
THUJA PLICATA	WESTERN RED CEDAR	N of main house along service drive, in central bed	
TSUGA CANADENSIS	EASTERN HEMLOCK	West of cottage	Rare