

THOMAS, Robert G. COLLECTION
Architecture Museum, University of South Australia

THOMAS, Robert George

SERIES 150

BIOGRAPHY

Robert George Thomas was among the first colonists who arrived in South Australia in 1836. Aged only sixteen he travelled on the 'Cygnet' with Deputy Surveyor George Strickland Kingston to whom he was an articled student. His parents, Robert and Mary Thomas, arrived later with their other children.

Thomas worked for architect George Strickland Kingston as draughtsman and it is probable that he drew the original plan of Adelaide. When Kingston left the colony for England Thomas then gained employment as a draughtsman in the government Survey Office and drafted the first official map of Adelaide. On the return of Kingston to Adelaide in June 1838 the staff of the Survey Office collectively resigned under the mistaken belief that Kingston had censured them whilst in London. Thomas then gained employment as a draughtsman with Light, Finnis & Co., a company formed by the disgruntled surveyors. The practice lasted only a short while and following the death of Colonel William Light dissolved in September 1839. During this time Thomas worked principally on land subdivisions.

In 1839 Thomas returned to work for Kingston, principally as a clerk. In 1841 Kingston began work for the Adelaide Corporation as Town Surveyor and Rates Collector with Thomas as his assistant. In 1842 a windmill on West Terrace, Adelaide for H.W. Phillips may have been Thomas' first built work, however he left Kingston in 1843 and following some lean years in the colony formed a partnership with William Parry James in January 1845 with the result of the practice gaining some small commissions. During the mining boom of the 1840s James and Thomas gained some work for Adelaide Mining Association undertaking mineral surveys before they decided to return to Britain.

When Thomas and James returned to Britain in 1846 they practised for some years in Newport, Wales where Thomas was involved with over fifty projects, amongst which were villas, chapels, offices and shops, principally in the Gothic style. Thomas married Charlotte Annanette Shum Tuckett in 1856 whilst in Britain and they had two children before returning to Adelaide in June 1861. They had a further seven children over the ensuing decade, two of whom died in infancy.

Thomas became engaged for some time in private practice designing many large public and private buildings and was made a Fellow of the Royal British Institute of Architects in December 1866. In July 1866 he was appointed as Assistant Government Architect and in 1868, Government Architect. The office was abolished in 1870 and Thomas resumed private practice, continuing to work predominantly in Italianate or Gothic Revival styles. After the 1873 Health Act was passed Thomas was appointed Secretary of the Central Board of Health, a position he held from 1874 until his death on 14 April 1883.

Thomas' first commission on his return to Adelaide in 1861 was the Gothic style bluestone and sandstone Flinders Street Baptist Church, Adelaide, followed by the Italianate styled Alberton Baptist Church (1863), the Italian Gothic warehouses in King William Street, Adelaide for Thomas Johnson, constructed of Glen Osmond stone with freestone columns (1865), the substantial Matthew Goode Residence on the corner of Wakefield and Hutt Streets, Adelaide (now demolished) and Stow Memorial Congregational Church, Flinders

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Street, Adelaide in early French Gothic style (1866). He also designed the Register Chambers (1865) for his family's newspaper and printing business, Adelaide.

As Assistant and the Government Architect between 1866 and 1870, Thomas designed Mt Gambier Hospital (1867-9), the Supreme Court Buildings, Adelaide (1867) and the Parkside Lunatic Asylum (later called Glenside Hospital) (1868), Greenhill Road, Glenside. When he returned to private practice commissions included St Augustine's Church, Unley Road, Unley (1869) in English Gothic style, the Bagster House (1872), Unley Road, Unley, and the Port Adelaide Institute (1875), Commercial Road, Port Adelaide in Venetian Italian style and constructed of Dry Creek rubble stone.

This is an abridged version of Christine Sullivan (2008) 'Robert G. Thomas, *Architects of South Australia database*, online

http://www.architectsdatabase.unisa.edu.au/arch_full.asp?Arch_ID=62

SOURCES

Langmead, D. (c.1980-90) Research notes, letters and paper on colonial architect Robert George Thomas. Includes colour photographs and negatives, Langmead Collection S219/5/1, AM.

Langmead, D. (1990) 'The Mild Colonial Boy: R.G. Thomas, Architect, of Newport', *Gwent Local History*, Autumn, no.69, Langmead Collection S219/5/3, AM.

Marsden, S., Stark, P. and Sumerling, P. (eds.) (1990) *Heritage of the City of Adelaide*, Corporation of the City of Adelaide, Adelaide.

Page, M. (1986) *Sculptors in Space*, South Australian Architects 1836-1986, RAI SA Chapter, Adelaide.

Christine Sullivan (2008) 'Robert G. Thomas, *Architects of South Australia database*, online http://www.architectsdatabase.unisa.edu.au/arch_full.asp?Arch_ID=62

COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

The Thomas collection comprises two watercolours of stained glass window designs of religious subjects by Robert George Thomas, dated 1842, 1846.

COLLECTION NOTE

See also Langmead Research collection (c.1980-90) Research notes, letters and paper on colonial architect Robert George Thomas. Includes colour photographs and negatives, Langmead Collection S219/5/1, AM.

Series List

Series	Description
S150	Two watercolours of stained glass window designs of religious subjects by Robert George Thomas, dated 1842, 1846 in plan files. Enclosed in a polypropylene envelope. Imprint of original frame, letter and account for conservation included.