George Chaffey and his brother William Benjamin arrived in Mildura in 1886, where they established the first irrigation scheme in Australia. Following great success with irrigation in California, the Chaffey brothers, originally from Canada, had been approached by Victorian Premier Alfred Deakin, who was under pressure to open up more land for farming and settlement.

The Chaffey families relocated to Mildura Station Homestead. Following the success of early irrigation development work, William began construction of Rio Vista in 1889. The Spanish style name Rio Vista (River View) reflects the Californian influences found in the Queen Anne style house.

In 1889 William’s wife Hattie tragically died of pneumonia shortly after the birth of their sixth child. The baby died soon afterwards and was buried with his mother, close to the homestead. Whilst William continued on his many business trips to California, the rest of the family moved into the then completed Rio Vista, with William’s mother and sister left in charge of the children. On William’s last visit to America, he married his first wife’s niece Hattie and brought her back to live at Rio Vista. Six more children were subsequently born to William and his second wife.

Although the Mildura scheme was a remarkable achievement, the Chaffey brothers encountered financial difficulties and never realised the dream of prosperity that Rio Vista symbolised. George Chaffey returned to America in 1897. William died in 1926, and Hattie remained living in the house for twenty-four years until her death in 1950.

Back in 1944, a valuable art collection had been bequeathed to the Mildura City Council by Senator R D Elliott, owner of the Elliott Newspaper Group. The bequest was on condition that a suitable place be found to house the collection. In 1950 Rio Vista was purchased for £18,000 and converted into an art gallery. Several rooms in Rio Vista, including the conservatory, were converted for display purposes, and many of the original surfaces were painted over. Conversion into the Mildura Art Gallery saved the house from probable demolition and subdivision of the surrounding grounds.

Rio Vista was opened as Mildura Art Gallery by Sir Dallas Brooks in May 1956. It remained as a gallery until 1966, when Sir Henry Bolte opened Mildura Regional Arts Centre. Rio Vista is one of Mildura’s most important heritage buildings, and maintains a commanding presence in the Mildura Arts and Cultural Precinct.

In more recent times the focus has been on exploring the history of the Chaffey family, and restoration of Rio Vista to the splendour of its earlier years. Ongoing conservation and restoration works continue preservation of the facility for future generations, strengthening the story of its heritage and history within the cultural landscape.
ABOUT THE HOUSE

The Architects
Messrs Sharland and Edmonds were responsible for the design and building of Rio Vista. Mr E N Wells was in charge of the brickwork, the carpentry being handled by Chapman and Sherring. W Kells from Ontario was commissioned to do the cabinetwork. The red bricks were fired in local kilns and the Murray Pine and Red Gum were brought from Risbey’s Sawmills.

Basement
Originally cellars used for storage, and a ballroom with a fireplace. The Ballroom floor, made of Murray Pine, was originally sprung for dancing. Over the years, the effects of damp and salt have eroded the springs, causing the floorboards to become bowed.

Ground Floor
All floors are made of Western Australian Jarrah, except for the hallway.

Hallway
The beautiful floor is inlaid with Italian tiles. The wood panels are made of local and other timbers. The original embossed Lincrusta wallpaper was made in England. Skilled craftsmen used the best materials, as can be observed in the use of cedar doors, door knobs, locks and brass hinges.

Smoking Room
Locally grown Murray Pine was used for the walls and ceilings, and Western Australian Karri for the floors. Each piece of wood was separately grooved and then fitted together. The fireplace is made of Italian black marble.

Dining Room
This room is restored to original appearance. The mantelpiece is made of different types of Italian marble and the beautiful ceiling consists of local Murray Pine. The Oriental screen, made from Chinese Rosewood, was used as a ‘distraction’ from the service entrance into the dining room from the kitchen, and would have been placed across the doorway.

Drawing Room and Breakfast Room
Originally heavy curtains would be drawn across the archway of this room to create two smaller rooms, and pulled back when necessary and for entertaining.

Restoration work in 2006 saw new ceiling and wallpaper installed, fortuitously leading to discovery on the archway of four spandrel frescos.

Kitchen
This room was located across the service doorway from the Dining Room, and consisted of a large kitchen, scullery and pantry.

Stained Glass Windows
These windows were handmade and imported from England, except for two new hand-painted and stained glass windows in the main front door, the imagery in which is a contemporary take on the region, complete with local Mildura oranges.
Main Staircase and Servants’ Staircase
These are both made from Blackwood.

First Floor
This floor consisted of five bedrooms; a bathroom with inlaid mosaic floor and containing a large white marble bath; and a hallway, restored in 2015, which was used as a sitting room. The floors are made of Western Australian Karri. In the late 1960s the Best Bedroom had been refurbished in a manner not in keeping with any of the original interior design of the house. In early 2016 it was transformed, with restoration included painting, along with installation of new ceiling and wall papers recreated based on documentation, and in-depth investigation of an existing fragment of original wall paper. In the future, the remaining bedrooms will also be restored using the colours and materials of the Best Bedroom.

Gardener’s Cottage
A small two storeyed building at the rear of Rio Vista.

Fountain
Following the tragic drowning of a Chaffey child in 1897, the original fountain now stands in Deakin Avenue, having been donated to the township in 1936 to commemorate 25 years since the Coronation of King George V. The replica fountain was installed in front of Rio Vista for centenary celebrations in October 1991.

Conservatory
Attached to the house for recreational purposes when the Chaffeys were in residence. It was used as a gallery to display the Brangwyn Murals, before being demolished when the new gallery was connected to Rio Vista in 1966.

MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why are the two Mrs Chaffeys referred to as Hattie?
Answer: William’s second wife was the niece of his first wife, and both wives bore the same name.

What is the corrugated roller in the kitchen display case?
Answer: For use when rolling out breadsticks.

What is the item lying across the bed in the main bedroom?
Answer: An ‘Invalid’s tidy’, for holding medicines and handkerchiefs.

On the dresser in the bathroom, what is the item that looks like a small rolling pin?
Answer: It is a ‘Coiffure Tidy’ for false ringlets to be wound around, along with ribbons, pins, etc.
Architects - Messrs. Sharland and Edmonds whose plans largely followed ideas supplied by W.B. Chaffey.