



June 2009

**EAST  
MELBOURNE  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY  
NEWSLETTER**

## Contributions and Suggestions

We invite contributions relating to the history of East Melbourne from our members. Articles of up to 1500 words will be considered for publication. Small articles and items of interest are also welcome.

We would be pleased to receive your suggestions and ideas for activities, guest speakers, excursions or anything else you might like us to organize on your behalf.

Please contact any member of our committee.

## Aims

A full Statement of Purposes appears in our Documents of Incorporation but briefly the aims of the Society are as follows:

- To foster an interest in the history of East Melbourne.
- To build an archive of material relevant to the history of East Melbourne.
- To promote interchange of information through lectures and tours.
- To promote heritage preservation.

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## Committee

### President:

Jill Fenwick 9419 0437

### Vice President:

Graham Shepherd 9486 9039

### Hon. Secretary:

Sylvia Black 9417 2037

### Treasurer:

Malcolm Howell 0417 337 519

### Committee:

Deirdre Basham 9421 3252

Graham Riches 9419 5275

Jacinta Ryan 0408 697 108

Barbara Toone 9415 9117

### CONTACT DETAILS

**1<sup>st</sup> Floor, East Melbourne Library,  
122 George Street, East Melbourne  
PO Box 355, East Melbourne 8002**

**Telephone: 9416 0445.**

**Email: [info@emhs.org.au](mailto:info@emhs.org.au)**

**Web: [www.emhs.org.au](http://www.emhs.org.au)**

## Membership

Membership of the East Melbourne Historical Society is open to all who are interested in the history of East Melbourne.

**Enquiries: Deirdre Basham: 9421 3252**

Annual subscription: \$25.00

Guests are welcome  
at individual meetings \$5.00

**Affiliated with  
The Royal Historical Society of Victoria**

# President's Letter

It's autumn again, the yellow leaves drifting lazily into gutters and gardens and settling in brown inviting piles along paths and in the public parks. Ah, you say, it's footy season and once more the pilgrimage of club supporters will march through our suburb praying for victory and talking in joyous tones about the merits of their favourite stars. Grandparents, pusher-borne babies, parents and kids, of every race, colour and creed will proudly wear the colours of their team, the black and white, gold and brown, red and black and, proudest of all again this year, the blue and white of Geelong and red, black and white of St. Kilda.

Bruce Dawe summed up footy fervour when he said of Victorians:

They will not grow old as those from  
more northern states grow old  
For them it will always be three-  
quarter-time with the scores level and  
the wind advantage in the final term  
That passion persisting like a race-  
memory, through the welter of  
seasons

Enabling old timers by boundary  
fences to dream of resurgent lions  
And centaur figures from the past to  
replenish continually the present  
(Bruce Dawe *Life Cycle*)

No matter what the chill in the  
air or the fine drizzle drifting down,  
the stream of people never falters and  
nor does their goodwill. Holy Trinity  
benefits from their enthusiasm, selling

thousands of sausages hot from the grill every year. A festive air is given to the chairs at Norm's and the streetscape of the George St. café, as football scarves drape over the chairs and beanies are temporarily laid aside for a good coffee before the match. The crowd at the V Lounge spills over onto the footpath, invoking the sacred names of Gary Ablett, Brendan Fevola and the mighty Rocca.

From our house, we can hear the scream of the siren and the thunderous roars and groans of the crowd as a goal is kicked or missed. And afterwards, elated by a win, but by no means dispirited by a loss, the faithful make their way home again, upheld by the faith that keeps them going every week until September. For those of us in this most fortunate of suburbs, it's a weekly festival, as uplifting to the spirit and those gorgeous hot air balloons that drift overhead at dawn.

*Jill Fenwick*

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East Melbourne Historical Society

<http://emhs.org.au>

Contact: Graham Shepherd 0408 616 390

## Vale — Nina Stanton (1948-2009)

The Society has lost a great friend and supporter with the death of Nina Stanton on 2 May. Nina was a member of our committee from October 2001 to October 2004, and was vice president 2002-2003. With her museum and exhibition experience she was invaluable in helping establish our cataloguing and filing system. She was also at the forefront of our very successful photographic display at Clarendon Terrace in 2004, "A Picture of Diversity", held in celebration of the East Melbourne Group's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. And it was she who led a team of talented Johnston Collection guides to give us the highly entertaining "court case" which endeavoured to prove the relationship between Thomas Welton Stanford of Stanford House in Clarendon Street and William Johnston, benefactor of The Johnston Collection, whose mother, the grand-daughter of Maria Stanford, once worked at Stanford House.

Her work for us, however, was but a tiny dot in her extensive and varied career. She was one of those extraordinary people who falling spectacularly at the first hurdle, go on to win the race. She failed her Leaving (Year 11) twice, did a secretarial course and became a proficient court reporter. Deciding that this was not something she could do for ever she returned to school, gained her Year 12 qualifications and went on to Melbourne University where she finished with a Diploma in Museum Studies (1979), a B.A. in Fine Arts and History (1983), and a M.Ed. (1995).



Courtesy of The Johnston Collection

At the same time her new career path was developing, starting with a position as Research Assistant at the Performing Arts Museum. She began her own company in 1988 which specialised in museum services. Under that umbrella she worked on several projects, a highlight being her work at the Royal Exhibition Building where she created an archive of its history. In 1995 she was appointed director of the Old Treasury Museum; in 1996 she took over as director of Norfolk Island Museums; and from 2000-2008 she was director of The Johnston Collection.

It was in this last position that she reached her peak. The Johnston Collection blossomed under her

directorship. Already this house museum was unique in its display as the house of a real, living person, with personal objects arranged to bring to life the museum quality artefacts. But Nina added more. She organised for guest designers to re-arrange the house twice a year, making sure the displays never became stale. And each year she booked a different group of crafts people to decorate the house for Christmas. These displays were booked out from one year to the next, and had to be extended well into February. She vastly increased the educational aspects of the museum. She was able to persuade the Trustees to buy the house next door, now known as the Gallery, and there she ran an enticing program of lectures and workshops all based on aspects of the Collection.

Her proudest achievement, however, was the creation of the Copland

Foundation, named for the eccentric Toorak collector, Alexander Copland. On his death his wish was that his collection be left to the state, like that of William Johnston. Nina, as his executor, realised that it was financially impossible and instead, still within the spirit of his will, created the Foundation and was appointed its founding Chairman of Trustees. The Foundation offers scholarships to the Attingham Trust in England, a specialist institution providing education in country houses, together with their collections and landscape settings. Both Nina and Copland had studied at the Attingham Schools. The Copland Foundation also supports projects within the country house tradition.

Her death is a great loss to the community but her inspiration will live on.

## Ann Blainey

In April, we were fortunate to have Ann Blainey, winner of the 2009 National Biography Prize, to speak to us about the life of Dame Nellie Melba. Ann's talk and her encyclopaedic knowledge of her subject emphasized the enormity of Melba's achievement. Her great journey from Melbourne to the opera houses of London, Paris and New York was truly astonishing in an age when photography and recording were in their infancy and radio and television did not exist. Nellie Melba also challenged convention; it was almost unheard of for a married woman to be on the stage, to neglect her

husband and domestic duties in order to pursue her own career. Only a person of supreme talent, soaring ambition, high determination – and physical stamina – could have achieved the conquest of three continents that Melba achieved.

We had a full house ourselves for Dame Nellie and I urge you to ring Deirdre and book your seat for our next lecture. Laurie Moore is a familiar and well-loved member of the Holy Trinity congregation. The former organist at the Cairns Uniting Church and now at Holy Trinity, his lecture will follow this history of the Cairns Uniting Church until fire destroyed it in 1988.

## Bombs Away

If you see a plane loaded with bombs, duck for cover under a bush. The bomb shelter behind the apartments in Garden St. will be removed over the next few months and East Melbournians will have to make their own arrangements.

The bomb shelter, a large rectangular structure with a heavy concrete roof and triple strength walls, was probably built in 1942. It was on December 7, 1941, the Japanese air force attacked Pearl Harbour and Japan began to move swiftly south, threatening the security of Australia. Melbourne prepared for invasion, with trenches dug in the Fitzroy Gardens, and the triangle at the Punt Rd. end of Wellington Parade. Blackouts and brownouts were instituted to deceive fighter planes into thinking that no city lay below their wings. American troops poured into the city and camped in the parklands around Melbourne University.

Now, however, the bomb shelter is redundant. It has no practical use, having only one door, which opens outwards, and no windows. It is unfurnished and lacks even a toilet, though there is an escape hatch on the western side. In spite of Graham Shepherd's desire (see our website) of finding anything at all inside, nothing remains. And so the bomb shelter will disappear, but the East Melbourne Historical Society will keep a file on its existence, including the maps showing its location, interior and exterior photographs and the correspondence with the developers. If any of our members has any information about preparations for invasion, please let us know, so we can add it to our archives. Ring Jill, Sylvia or Graham, write a letter or send us an e-mail – every small piece of information helps.

## Death in a Cesspit

"An extraordinary accident, resulting in the death of two men, happened in East Melbourne yesterday morning. At about 1 o'clock in the morning two nightmen named John Rain and John Rain, junior, father and son, living in Cambridge-street, Collingwood, were employed cleansing a large cesspit in the yard of Mr. Kong Meng, Chinese merchant, at the [north-east] corner of Albert and Clarendon Streets, East Melbourne. From the nature of the accident, nothing very positive can be known as to how the men got into the pit, but it appears pretty certain that the

following account, which is that given by those who were working with the two Rains is correct. In order to get at the nightsoil in the cesspit, which is said to be about 6ft. deep, and of considerable width, it was necessary to open a trap in the floor of the closet. Young Rain, it is supposed, went down the pit through this trap-door to assist his father, and was immediately overcome by the foul air, and, becoming insensible, fell into the nightsoil deposit at the bottom, and was at once suffocated. His father, either in following him to rescue him, or accidentally falling after him, also got

into the pit, and met exactly the same fate. The other men who were working at another cesspit in the yard, heard the noise caused by the father falling in, and going into the closet found that both men were down in the horrid pit of nightsoil. An effort to get them up was made, a ladder being procured, but it was not successful for some time, and the men who went down for the bodies nearly shared the fate of the deceased men. As



Photo: Daryl Stanisich 2003

soon as the bodies were recovered Dr. Webb was sent for, but he found both the Rains, father and son, to be quite dead. The bodies were conveyed to the morgue...[where] the city coroner, Dr. Youl, held an inquest..."

The report of the inquest, as well as confirming the cause of death, provides an illuminating picture of life in Melbourne before our modern sewerage system. From the various witnesses, who included Thomas Plant, servant to Mr. Kong Meng we learn that there were two cesspits on the property, one for the family and one for the servants; that they were emptied approximately once a year; and that on this occasion the nightmen were to be paid £5 to empty both cesspits.

The cesspit in which the accident happened was described by Mr. Fullerton, inspector of nuisances, as being "about 6½ft. deep, 8ft. long, and 5ft. wide. It was apparently well made and well cemented. There was a ventilating pipe from the seat and also another ventilator."

To empty it required up to four trips by the night cart. George Payne, nightman, explained the technique, "We

generally dip in to pits as far as we can first, and then go down and stand in them when emptying them." He added that, "occasionally we take down a light with us to test the air". If the light went out the air was foul, but as George Payne said, "you can tell before you go down far whether the air is bad." Mr. Fitzgibbon, town clerk, warned "that there was a very great danger in testing the safety of a cesspit by putting down a light. There had been several explosions from this practice." But the coroner, Mr. Youl, said that the explosions were caused by another gas altogether.

Henry Humphreys, a nightman who had cleaned the pit on another occasion, believed that lime was used to help decomposition, and that this caused the development of carbonic acid gas. Being a heavy gas it would collect at the bottom of the pit and not rise up through any ventilating pipe.

An un-named witness, added that "There are not many cesspits in East Melbourne, but where they exist they are much more offensive than the new closets. The corporation have had over 6,000 filled up since the new system came into operation." To which Mr.

McKean, counsel for the nightmen's relatives, responded, "If the cesspits are watertight, there are no means to compel the owner to fill them up. That is the defect of the law."

In summing up Dr. Youl said "it was perfectly plain how these men had met their death: they had been suffocated by carbonic acid gas, which was immediately fatal to life. This gas was so heavy that it fell to the bottom of the cesspit and as the nightmen dug deeper it still descended, and took the place of the faecal matter, so that when the men got to the bottom it suffocated them."

The jury inevitably returned a verdict of accidental death from suffocation. Dr. Youl, passed "some severe but well merited remarks upon the sanitary state of the city and suburbs, and expressed his belief that unless remedial measures were taken, ere long we should be visited by a decimating plague."

At the request of the jury, he promised to bring this matter before the Government through the Central Board of Health, so as to attempt to obtain the abolition of cesspits.

And so he did. This case turned out to be pivotal. Dr. Youl's "decimating plague" came in the form of a scarlet fever epidemic the same year and as historian, Bernard Barrett wrote, "As scarlet fever was considered a 'miasmatic' disease, the government finally agreed to empower metropolitan councils from April 1876 to fill up any unhealthy-looking cesspit, leaking or not, and to prohibit any new cesspit."

## Sources

*The Argus*, 15 and 16 October, 1875  
Barrett, Bernard, *The Inner Suburbs: the evolution of the industrial era*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1971

## Research Query

We have had an enquiry from a family historian asking if we know anything about 'Tandara' in Vale Street. Her husband's grand-mother, Alice Gleeson Treacy, lived there in 1914 and was listed as a nurse. If anyone knows where this house is (or was) please let us know.

## Coming Events

**Wednesday, 17 June at 8.00 p.m.**

Laurie Moore will tell us about the life and times of Rev. Dr. Adam Cairns and the history of the church named in his memory. Laurie was a member of the congregation at Cairns Memorial Church until it burnt down in 1988. He is an authority on Presbyterian Church history.

**Wednesday, 19 August at 8.00 p.m.**

Dr. Jo Wainer will speak on the struggle to decriminalize abortion in Victoria. In 1967, Wainer and her husband, Dr. Bertram Wainer launched a campaign to reform the laws which treated abortion as a crime, resulting in the Menhennit ruling of 1969 and finally, the legalizing of abortion in October 2008.

**Both meetings at Clarendon Terrace, 210 Clarendon Street, East Melbourne**