



March 2011

**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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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

We finished 2010 in very good spirits, with a wonderful Christmas party at EMHS member Vern Hauser's apartment. Vern was one of the astute early buyers in 150 Clarendon St. and one hundred of our members fitted very comfortably into his generous rooms and large terrace overlooking the Fitzroy Gardens and north to Collingwood. We are very grateful to those members over the years who have lent us their houses. The Christmas party is always a highlight of the year, allowing members to catch up and to celebrate the season together. We keep the costs as low as possible, thanks to the generosity of Committee members, who prepare and donate the bulk of the food. Deirdre Basham is the 'chef-in-charge', while Alan organises the drinks and acts as bartender for the night. Great thanks are owed to both for their hard work and organisational skills

It's been a very strange summer this year. In Victoria, we have had floods in the western district and the north-west, a large bushfire in Gippsland, and heavy downfalls of rain across the state and in Melbourne. In Queensland, Cyclone Yasi destroyed infrastructure, houses, businesses and crops. Who could forget the sight of the Brisbane boardwalk pulling away from its moorings and speeding down the river, only to be turned by an heroic tugboat crew from crashing into the Storey Bridge? Or the brave men and women who put their lives at risk to rescue

others from flooded cars and houses? Such disasters bring out the best and worst in people: on the one hand, the small boy who told the rescue crew to take his brother first as he couldn't swim; on the other, the looters who tried to rob people of the little they had left.

February weather, too, has been unusual, warm, cloudy and humid, so that the air smells of vegetation, as though we are in the tropics. Our parks and gardens are flourishing. In the Botanic Gardens, the lawns are deep green and go down to the water – the concrete borders of the lakes have disappeared. The lakes themselves are covered with duck-weed so thickly that the tiny baby moorhens are able to walk on top. The trees and shrubs have grown under the twin influences of warm weather and water, with the Fitzroy Gardens' trees looking healthy and strong, so unlike the stresses specimens of the last few years. In the Treasury Gardens, one duck family consists of a very vigilant mother and father and nine small ducklings, the largest family we have seen in years.

And so the new year starts. The Reverend John Stewart has left to go to a new parish. His energy, enthusiasm and compassion will be remembered. The Johnston Collection is planning changes which will broaden its capacity to show the collection. The EMHS has long and happy associations with the Johnston Collection and applaud this initiative, but there are

concerns about management of the increased numbers of visitors. Research is about to begin on the social history of Bishopscourt, which will add to community knowledge about the work of the Archbishops' wives and families and the links between Bishopscourt and the community. Our own research proceeds on the architectural heritage

of East Melbourne, with the hope that we will produce another booklet by the end of this year. I wish all our members a happy, if belated, new year and urge you to support our work by attending the very interesting set of lectures for this year.

Jill Fenwick
President

Peter McLean and his Labour of Love

In October last year Sotheby's sold a remarkable piece of furniture described in their catalogue as:

An important Australian cedar and specimen wood sideboard of grand proportions carved with the pictorial history of the foundation and progress of the colony of Victoria, circa 1860-1873.

It measured 340cm wide by 92.5cm deep by 351cm high (approx. 11ft x 3ft x 11½). It had been exhibited in the 1866-1867 Intercolonial Exhibition of Australia in Melbourne where it earned its maker a medal 'for excellent workmanship'. It was subsequently redesigned and enlarged in time for inclusion in Victoria's display at the 42nd International Exhibition, held in London in 1873, where it was awarded a bronze medal. Again using the words of the catalogue, 'it is a tour de force of precision joinery, wooden inlay and detailed high-relief carving'. It depicts an abundance of native flora and fauna, along with scenes from the colony's history including a tableau of John Batman and his party meeting with

William Buckley watched by a group of aborigines.

The man behind this masterwork was cabinetmaker, Peter McLean, a past resident of East Melbourne. He lived at 40 George Street from 1876, after his wife's death, until his own death in 1904, in one of a pair of houses built by his son, William, in 1868. William McLean was a founding partner of the hardware firm, McLean Bros & Rigg (now, by merger and descent, Bunnings) and whose own house, Torloisk, was also in East Melbourne, on the corner of Vale Street and Wellington Parade South.

Peter McLean was born in 1813 in Dumfries, Scotland where he trained as a cabinetmaker. He arrived in Melbourne with his wife, Jane, and young family in 1853, and quickly established himself in his profession here. His first known address until 1866 was 79 Spring Street, opposite Parliament House, where we can assume work on the sideboard started. Later he moved his workshop to Capel

Street, Hotham (North Melbourne), where it was completed.

While McLean was responsible for the overall design and joinery of the piece other hands did the carving. A contemporary newspaper account gives their names as Messrs. Poleski and Terlechi. The latter can be identified as the Polish born, Felix Terlecki of Lygon Street, Carlton, but Poleski remains a mystery. McLean started work on the sideboard in 1860 intending it for the International Exhibition in London in 1862, but it was not finished in time. In its first incarnation the sideboard's overall height and width were smaller by 60 cm. or two feet. Missing was the existing central section which was added in preparation for the 1873 International Exhibition. It includes a high, arched back inlaid with over



The sideboard.

Image courtesy Sotheby's Australia

1,000 pieces of mahogany, cedar, blackwood and satinwood; Corinthian columns; and the Batman panel. The Batman panel is carved in a different, more naturalistic, style from the earlier



The Batman panel. Image courtesy Sotheby's Australia

carvings and the artist has not been identified. Terlecki died in 1869, so while it is possible that he started the panel, it is unlikely that he finished it. The name of Angus McLean (research has not revealed any relationship) has been suggested. He was a carver of some renown and worked on St. Patrick's Cathedral and Parliament House, among many other important city buildings.

In 1866 the sideboard was valued at £1300. In the same year a quarter acre block of land was advertised for sale in George Street for £165; on South Yarra Hill a brand new brick house with slate roof was priced at £1100. It had 'five rooms plus kitchen, servant's-room, and bathroom; land 50 x 180, commanding view of Melbourne, bay, and suburbs'; and you could buy a worker's cottage in Carlton from £55. At the recent Sotheby's sale the sideboard fetched

\$600,000, including buyer's premium. However the sideboard was a labour of love for Peter McLean and he never profited from this extraordinary piece, it remaining in his family until the 1920s.

Sources:

Sotheby's Catalogue: Fine Furniture & Decorative Arts Melbourne 25 & 26 October 2010

The Age, 22 Nov 1866 as reprinted in *The Queenslander*, 8 Dec 1866, p.3

Victoria and its Metropolis, Vol. II, p. 612 (for Angus McLean)

The Evening Post (NZ), 25 March, 1869, p.2 (for Felix Terlecki)

The Argus, 1 and 8 Sept 1866, Houses and Land for Sale

City of Melbourne Rate Books
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_McLean_\(cabinet_maker\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_McLean_(cabinet_maker))
[viewed 9/2/2011]

Real Estate and Trees

Real estate and trees have both been of on-going interest to East Melbourne residents, so those who have followed the growth in house prices over the last few years might be interested in the following article from the Argus, 16 September, 1936:

The highest bid at auction yesterday for Clarendon Terrace, 208-212 Clarendon St., on land 75 ft. by 153 ft., was £5,750. For a terrace of five brick villas, each seven rooms at 19 to 27 Victoria Parade, the highest bid was £5,450. Both properties

were withdrawn for private sale by auctioneers E.M. Purdy and Co. Pty. Ltd. of Queen St.

And as for the trees, here are two letters from 1935:

Sir, As a visitor to Melbourne after an absence of some 10 years I was greatly disappointed to see the neglected forlorn state of the trees in East Melbourne. When I left Melbourne, these trees were notably beautiful. East Melbourne has improved in some respects, with its modern buildings here and there, but trees which are diseased

or mutilated have been allowed to fight for their own salvation. They all seem to be greatly in need of expert attention:- Yours etc. FAUX PAS Olinda, June 22

This was supported by two residents of East Melbourne, 'Tree Lover' and then 'Gum':

Sir:- I am pleased that 'Faux Pas' is interested in the deplorable condition of the trees in East Melbourne, especially in the streets running east and west. She has not had to watch their decline as we residents are doing. In Hotham St. particularly, there are diseased, unsightly objects which ought to be removed and replaced by something worthy of a fine, wide street, perhaps a centre plantation, as in the north-south streets. Yours, etc. TREE LOVER, June 26

'Gum' agreed:

Sir:- The letters of 'Faux Pas' and 'Tree Lover' are appreciated by residents of East Melbourne. Passing along the streets day by day, one grows

accustomed to the gradual decadence and neglect of these once-beautiful trees. Years ago, long before it was the custom of councils to have tree-lined streets, East Melbourne was noted for its delightful shade trees. The retrogression is much regretted by old residents such as myself. Gipps St. makes the lover of trees hang his head and blush at the neglect which confronts him. The dead and decayed trees should be replaced by the red flowering gum. Yours, etc. GUM, July 21

One can only applaud the efforts of these feisty citizens to get action from the City Council on the deterioration of the trees, but what a pity about that the suggestion made by 'Gum' to line Gipps Street with red flowering gums, was not acted upon. As for the real estate - and looking at Clarendon Terrace today - £5,750 would seem to be a remarkably good investment!

National Sports Museum

Strolling towards the MCG on a beautiful February afternoon one could be forgiven for forgetting the ongoing travails of Yarra Park. Extensive areas of lush green grass and newly mulched elms cast a shimmering veil over the eroded car tracks and dead and dying saplings - a moment's respite from the seemingly endless onslaught of cars.

About 20 members and friends gathered at the National Sports

Museum on the 16th of February. We were treated to a wonderful and comprehensive history of spectator sport. Poker and billiards may have been missing (one couldn't swear to that) but surfing was there as well as archery, the Olympics, horse racing, cricket and even football. "Football," you exclaim, "what is so surprising about that?" Well, "football" now apparently means soccer and the other game, our game, is called



Frederick Armand Powlett,
Commissioner of Crown Lands.

"AFL." Yes, even in the Mecca of Australian footy! However, our footy got plenty of coverage including a great 3D video of James Hird.

There were many great stories of our cricketing heroes. Even Liz Hurley's latest pickup was there in hologram (whatever that might mean) but this time not a twitter for the fans

There was even a place for aficionados of participatory sport. Not on the sacred turf, I am afraid - we wouldn't want that damaged by little sprigs. No, in the dungeons you could try your hand or foot at many things. There were even unconfirmed reports of our honorable president having a kick at goal.

One of many historical pearls: In 1839 our very own Freddy Powlett scored the first recorded century in Australia reaching 120 runs for the Gentlemen of the District against the Tradesmen of the Town.

Coming Events

At Clarendon Terrace,
210 Clarendon Street,
East Melbourne

Wednesday, 20 April, at 8.00 p.m.

Tom Wills

Tom Wills, a star cricketer, is credited with creating the game of Australian Rules Football to keep members of the cricket team fit over the winter months. But there was much more to his life than just sport. Psychiatrist and cricket nut, Greg de Moore, will tell us his extraordinary story, using much newly discovered material.

Dr. de Moore's biography, *Tom Wills, His Spectacular Rise and Tragic Fall*, was, among other honours, short listed for the National Biography Awards 2009.

Wednesday, 15 June at 8.00 pm,
The Victorian Drawing Room

Dr. Valerie Krips is Associate Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, and Fellow in the School of Culture and communication at the University of Melbourne. She is the author of *The Presence of the Past: Memory, History and Childhood in Postwar Britain*, and is currently writing a book on cultural memory. She will speak on the English drawing room and its influence in Australia, with particular reference to East Melbourne.