



June 2012

**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:

Rosie Smith 0431 707 405

### Hon. Secretary:

Sylvia Black 9417 2037

### Treasurer:

Malcolm Howell 0417 337 519

### Committee:

Deirdre Basham 9421 3252

Liz Rushen 9650 0525

Jacinta Ryan 9415 8288

Graham Shepherd 9486 9039

### 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 – Dog Days

Wherever I go, there's always Pooh,  
There's always Pooh and Me.  
Whatever I do, he wants to do,  
"Where are you going today?" says  
Pooh:  
"Well, that's very odd, 'cos I was too.  
Let's go together" says Pooh, says he.  
"Let's go together," says he.

On any morning at around 8 am, even these cool, grey mornings of early May, where the damp leaches into your bones and the sun seems reluctant to come out at all, you will see a group of people in Yarra Park. They stand in the centre of the paddock, chatting with animation, while around them all is tumult, as dogs race here and there. Lean whippets, rather grand poodles, fluffy white Yorkshire terriers, small self-important corgies and dogs of indeterminate breed run and jump and chase balls or just their own shadows in a triumphant celebration of life and energy and above all, friendship.

Some dogs eschew the rough and tumble of the paddock and concentrate on honing the skills particular to their breed. There's the young and swift nearly-a-border-collie who crouches low as he tries to catch a ball, then runs away triumphantly with it, ignoring the hapless calls of his owner who is trying to train him to return it, something he won't do until he's bored. There's the dark kelpie, who runs ahead and hides behind trees, only coming out when his owner has passed him and then racing ahead to surprise him with

its presence. Most clever of all is the frisbie dog, whose athletic leaps and twists as he catches the disc on its way down are a marvel of doggy skill and determination.

Dogs not only make marvellous friends, but establish a special identity for their owners. There were few people in East Melbourne who did not have a friendship with the late Betty Hall. Twice a day she would walk her dogs through the streets, the 'Heinz 47 varieties' Midge and the low-slung black dachshund George. George, indeed, was so low to the ground that as he grew older, he needed to be helped over gutters, his front legs not strong enough to propel the rest of his long body. Everyone knew Betty's dogs and everyone also knew Betty.

One day, when other work is done, the EMHS should do a calendar of dogs and their owners in our suburb, in celebration of their contribution to the quality of life and in celebration of relationships. As A.A. Milne so wisely pointed out, people and animals add much to each others' lives, even if they're only stuffed animals like Pooh.

So, wherever I am, there's always Pooh,  
There's always Pooh and Me.  
"What would I do?" I said to Pooh,  
"If it wasn't for you" and Pooh said  
"True,  
It isn't much fun for One, but Two  
Can stick together," says Pooh, says he  
"That's how it is," says Pooh.

Jill Fenwick, May 2012

# Balcombes, Books and Napoleon Buonaparte

The old Herbert Farjeon song 'I've danced with a man, who's danced with a girl, who danced with the Prince of Wales' rather approximates this East Melbourne story. In 1815, following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and the decisions of the Congress of Vienna, it was enacted that he be exiled to the island of St. Helena, a British possession in the South Atlantic Ocean. Here, with only three days notice for the local authorities, Napoleon landed with his thirty generals and staff on 16 October, 1815.

Housing was the first priority. He was offered the Vice-Governor's summer residence, Longwood House, but this was remote, dilapidated and, it was said, uninhabitable in winter. Instead, having seen a very pleasant pavilion attached to the house of William Balcombe, a trader reputed to be the illegitimate son of George IV, he asked to be housed there. And so, the Balcombe family acquired a distinguished guest.

The Briars, as Balcombe's house was called, soon became the centre of social activity. The family welcomed the deposed Emperor and he became part of the family. He was especially fond of the Balcombe's 13 year old daughter, Lucia Elizabeth, known as Betsy, while William Balcombe was appointed Purveyor for supplies to the household at Longwood and the Pavilion. Alas, the relationship came to an abrupt halt when Balcombe, apparently about to be charged with



Alexander Balcombe.  
Photo courtesy The Briars, Mt. Martha

smuggling out Napoleon's letters and helping him in negotiating money bills, left on leave for England. He was refused permission to return to St. Helena, with the British authorities suspecting that he had continued to act as an intermediary between France and Napoleon.

After Balcombe's departure, Napoleon was forced to return to Longwood House. The severe climate and the stringencies imposed by the Governor, Sir Hudson Lowe, undoubtedly contributed to his death on 3 May 1821.

William Balcombe and his family did not prosper in England. The move from St. Helena had meant the end of his trading business and finances were difficult. Betsy married and had a small daughter, but the marriage failed.

They must have felt relieved when he was offered the position of Colonial Treasurer of NSW, a position that partially restored the family fortunes and gave him the opportunity to take up land grants around Goulburn. He died, aged 51, leaving not much for his wife and children. Mrs. Balcombe, with Betsy, returned to England, where she supported herself by giving piano lessons; Betsy married again and maintained a close friendship with the Buonaparte family, especially Louis Napoleon, exiled in London, but in 1852, Emperor Napoleon III.

The three Balcombe sons, William, Thomas and Alexander, remained in Australia and each named his house The Briars, after their home in St. Helena. Alexander Balcombe visited Port Phillip in 1939 and, in 1842, having married Emma Reid, daughter of a distinguished physician, settled permanently in at The Briars, Schnapper Point, on the Mornington Peninsula.

And here is the East Melbourne connection: in 1853, Alexander Balcombe built a house in East Melbourne, expanding it in 1854. This was the first Eastcourt, at 122 George St on the site of the present library and the Californian bungalow to its east. He became a magistrate in 1855, a member of the Melbourne Club and the first Chairman of the Mt Eliza Road Board. He died in East Melbourne on 21 September 1877, the last surviving son of William Balcombe.

Alexander Balcombe had been born in St Helena, on 4 August 1811, so

was only 6 years old when Napoleon landed. As the Sunbury News wrote, he 'saw the once invincible Napoleon fretting like a caged eagle on that lonely island... He had overthrown thrones and his boundless ambition ended in exile, made tolerable in a minor degree by the faithful few who voluntarily went in exile with him'. It was Alexander's daughter, Alice Emmerton, who inherited the collection of memorabilia, including furniture, given to the family by the imprisoned Emperor and her daughter, Mabel Balcombe Brookes (Dame Mabel Brookes) who expanded the collection and, as a symbol of the family's abiding esteem for Napoleon, purchased the original Pavilion on St. Helena, and presented it to the French government.

So, as you stand in your local library, idly perusing the fine collection of books and AV material, think to yourself

I stand in a spot  
where once stood a man  
who played with a man  
who won  
and lost  
France's greatest Empire

Honestly, in East Melbourne we have everything!

Thanks to the staff of 'The Briars', Mt. Martha, for the photographs of the Balcombe family. Dame Mabel Brookes' collection can be viewed at 'The Briars' homestead.

# The Dance Continues

"Miss Courtney Dix has become famous (says a Melbourne message to the *Sun*), She is the selected dancing partner of the Prince. And it was the royal person himself who, unaided, and without introduction, made the selection. She is a good dancer - her intimate friends say they would sooner dance with her than with anyone else in the world - and this seems to be the royal opinion.

"Miss Gertrude Courtney Dix has set Melbourne society by the heels. There is no one in Victoria today, excepting perhaps the Prince of Wales, who is receiving so much public attention. Her dresses and doings have formed the subject of most animated conversation in all circles, but particularly in the small set known as society. Up to Friday of last week Miss Courtney Dix confessed to eight dances with the Prince, and when interviewed she wished to hurry to her father's home in East Melbourne to dress for that night's Federal Government House Ball.

"An Australian girl, Miss Dix is the only child of a well-known public accountant of Queen-street, and a great Red Cross worker. She does not 'put on side' - even her social enemies say that of her. She regards the Prince as a very nice boy and a lovely dancer.

"It is true,' she said, 'that I was never introduced to the Prince. I did not expect to be. But it is equally true that we know each other now. It happened like this. I was at the first ball at Federal

Government-House, and my first close view of the Prince was when. I was dancing with Captain Duggan. As soon as that dance was over the Prince came over to me and asked me to dance. We danced. We just suited each other. He is a beautiful dancer - he works the one-step and fox trot into everything.'

"Is he an engaging partner? - Why, yes. He is just a boy, and he knows how to be entertaining. We dance together just like a girl and boy - and that is everything'.

"How many times? - Let me see, it's not so many times as I know people are saying. Let me count them up. Yes, we have had eight dances together - but I am going again tonight.'

"When the Prince first saw Miss Courtney Dix she was wearing-a white tulle frock, fashioned with the new farthingale effect - the extended hip line being defined with small pink rosebuds.

"She 'came out' two years ago, at a ball given by Mrs. Ross Soden, of Grong Grong, and of the Prince's festivities she has missed only the State Government House dance and Thursday night's Matrons' Ball at St. Kilda. The Prince has made it easy for her - she has been in everything, and her every movement has been watched with something approaching envy - a convenient word - by Melbourne's dowagers. She has even had a private view of the great battle-cruiser, H.M.S. Renown.

"And I'm having a ripping time,' declares the dancing partner pf royalty."

[*Barrier Miner (Broken Hill, NSW), 19 June 1920, p.7*]

Miss Courtney Dix was the granddaughter of John Speechley Gotch of Burnell, 109 Albert Street, East Melbourne, and her father, Mr. Harry Courtney Dix, was a director of the firm for forty years. She later married Lt. Commander Ian McDonald, R.A.N.

She lived with her parents at 160 Gipps Street, demolished c.1934 for the St. Mary's Nurses' Hostel built in conjunction with the Mercy Private Hospital. It too has been demolished to make way for the Mercy Place aged care home. Her fame as the dancing partner of the future King Edward VIII followed her for the rest of her life but, sadly, it was not she who inspired the famous song.

## The Stuff of Memory

In response to our request for contributions of memories, anecdotes or researched articles in the last issue of our newsletter, we have received a letter from Bruce McBrien with just the sort of detail that brings history alive. Here it is:

"Firstly, in the 1950s to 70s, the Melbourne Central Branch of the Liberal Party (which embraced East Melbourne) always set up its Committee Rooms in either the crypt of Cairns Memorial Church or the rear ground floor area of Mosspennock which was accessed from an entrance in the little laneway which serviced Cliveden. At that time the building housed the TPI [totally and permanently incapacitated ex-servicemen and women] Association.

"Secondly, as President of that Branch, committee meetings were mainly conducted in Howey House in Collins Street but if it became necessary to hold it elsewhere they were held in the residence of Mrs. Carol Jones



Park House, c.1878.  
Photo with permission of Judith Harley]

who owned and lived in a somewhat spectacular free standing terrace house of grand proportions in Wellington Parade, east of Powlett Street, next door to a Motor Garage which in turn was next door to the red brick building which still stands on the corner of Powlett Street. The article on Hercules prompts me to record that those meetings were held in her front parlour

which contained a very large sofa over which was draped a huge fur rug comprising solely of perfectly matched grey tortoise shell cat skins! Mrs. Jones was a great friend of Miss McConnackie who owned and lived in Koorine on the north/west corner of Powlett and George Street.

"Thirdly, living in Spring Street as we did, I well remember a hansom cab always available in Carpentaria Place outside the Cabman's shelter. That

shelter continues worry me down in Brunton Avenue as it is a 'sitting shot' for any vandals wishing to set it on fire. I do not know of any others existing in Melbourne except a recreated one in the grounds of Christ Church, South Yarra."

In one further link Bruce visited our Heritage Week exhibition, Lost Property, at the library and was delighted to find a photo of the house, Park House, which was home to the cat skin rug.

## Marlion House

A major omission from the story about horse era relics in our last issue was Marlion House, 33 Agnes Street, Jolimont. Marlion House was built as stables by Griffiths Bros., tea merchants, about 1915, and in 1927 was converted by The Herald & Weekly Times for use as a garage and service centre for its trucks. In the 1980s it was refurbished and is

now used as offices. There is currently an application before Council to build three storeys above this two storey building. The East Melbourne Historical Society has objected to the proposal on the grounds that the height and bulk of the additions are not respectful of the heritage place. The East Melbourne Group has also placed an objection.

## Coming Events

**Wednesday, 20 June**

Victorian Town House Gardens.

This talk will be presented by Helen Page OAM. Helen is a foundation member of the Australian Garden History Society since 1980 and Chair of the Victorian Branch 1994-2004. She played an important role in saving the garden at Bishops Court from subdivision and development in 1998, and has led a team of enthusiastic volunteer workers in restoring and maintaining the garden ever since.

**Wednesday, 15 August**

The Vanishing Sculptures

A visitor walking through the Fitzroy Gardens in the nineteenth century would have found their lush plantings highlighted with statues in the classical and neo-classical style. Now these have disappeared. Why? What happened to them? Terence Lane, former Senior Curator, Australian Art, NGV, and author of several books on the Australian decorative arts, will give us the answers, some of them surprising.