



September 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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## 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

The business section of The Age on 22 August 2012 advertised two churches for sale, one in Napier Street, Fitzroy and one in Oxford Street, Collingwood. Both were beautiful nineteenth century bluestone buildings, with halls attached and offered 'the discerning buyer the rarest of opportunities for either owner-occupation or a potential redevelopment'. A third church in Collingwood burnt down a couple of years ago and has not been rebuilt. Dwindling congregations, lack of finance and less centrality to community life has seen this scenario in many other suburbs of Melbourne. Now it comes to us, with Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Hotham Street, in need of community support in order to survive in its current role. Read Sylvia's story of its history inside this issue.

On a lighter note, spring is now officially with us. The magnificent magnolia tree at 57 Simpson Street is always the first to blossom, even though the weather remains chilly and largely overcast. Now, as we move into September, there are other signs: the swans in the gardens had their first cygnets in mid-August; the grass parrots, having been deprived of their habitat because of the new tennis court buildings, have moved to the other side of the Yarra and can be seen occasionally on the grass near the Swan Street bridge; daphne has come and largely gone, while the freesias and irises are making an appearance.

Best of all, however, is the dramatic re-appearance of a large flock of black cockatoos, though why call it a flock? It's more like a squadron. About forty of them fly over East Melbourne in formation every evening. They do land in Darling Square and have been seen around the tennis courts, but don't seem to make this area their habitat. Like the larrikin ockerism of the sulphur crested cockatoos, they hoon across the sky, squealing with joy as they go. I'm presuming from my bird book that they're the yellow-tailed variety, the only black cockatoo common to Victoria, though I've never seen the yellow bars on tail and earpatch.

Do we need to be more aware of supporting native birds with plantings? The trees planted recently by the City of Melbourne are largely non-indigenous, with Canadian maples a favourite. Gipps Street householders have been offered a choice for the new median strip of either Scarlet Oaks or Red Oaks. The old Melaleucas have largely been culled throughout the streets, not regrettably, because they exuded a sticky sap and dropped bits of things all over cars, while the sparrows, who loved them, added to the mess with droppings. Gums have been known to drop branches, so are not desirable near cars, but should be kept to the parks.

Perhaps, then, it's not so much solely the Council's job, but also ours to put in a few plants which will help

sustain our indigenous bird population. Wattle birds are nectar-eaters and love the Abutilon or Chinese Lantern tree, as do the small silver-eye finches. Native bushes like kangaroo paw and the various heaths also feed them. Lorikeets like flowering gums, such

as the one outside the library; black cockatoos like hard seeds; galahs forage on grass and kookaburras feed largely on lizards, mice and the occasional baby possum.

Jill Fenwick, August 2012

## Ada Tovell – First Woman Dentist

Michelle Calder has contacted us seeking information about her grand-mother's maternal grand-mother, Ada Tovell (nee Fenton), who she said was the first woman in Australia to practise as a dentist. Ada Fenton had been a student at Ormiston College, East Melbourne. We had no record of Ada Fenton or her family but she seemed like someone we should learn more about. Just using on-line resources there was much to be discovered.

Ada's father, James, was a Dublin solicitor born in county Sligo, Ireland. His own father had been chief examiner of the High Court of Chancery in Ireland. James and his wife, Kate, and their four older children arrived in Melbourne on the Great Britain in May 1861. They settled in Maryborough where James continued to practise law until his death in 1871, aged only fifty. Ada was born in 1865 and so was just a small child at the time. Only three years later one of her older sisters,

Louise, died. By this time the family was living at 3 Wellington Terrace, Wellington Parade. This terrace of five houses has now been demolished but was on the corner of Hoddle Street. Her youngest sister, Bessie, died in 1879 when the family was living at 7



The Ormiston Educational Establishment for Young Ladies, Grey Street, East Melbourne.

Canterbury Terrace, Powlett Street (now No. 94).

Ada would have matriculated around 1882-83. Afterwards, to quote from her obituary, she 'entered upon the study of dentistry, and in 1891 was articled to her husband, the late Dr. Ernest W. Tovell' One wonders

what caused her to use her talents in this way. Was she deliberately striking a blow for women? Was she one of the growing number of suffragettes? Her signature does not appear on the Monster Petition of 1891, so perhaps not. Maybe Dr. Tovell himself was the attraction. Certainly it would have been very difficult otherwise for a woman to find a willing mentor in a world entirely dominated by men. In the words of the Dental Museum's website, 'The prevailing view at the time was that women were too emotional, lacked intellectual stamina and were physically incapable of the continuous effort required for entry to a profession or business'.

Ernest Walter Tovell was the son of Dr. Charles Joshua Tovell, a medical practitioner of Brighton. He and his brother, William Raymond (Ray) Tovell, studied dentistry at the Philadelphia Dental College, U.S.A., each graduating as Doctor of Dental Surgery (D.D.S.) in 1884. They were said to be the first. Victorian students to graduate in dentistry. They returned immediately to Melbourne and set up a joint practice at 1 Treasury Place, Spring Street (later No. 51), opposite the Treasury Gardens, advertising as American Dentists.

Ernest and Ada married in December 1890 at her mother's home, 17 Spring Street since about 1884, just a few doors down from the dental surgery. By then the two brothers had established separate practices with Ray moving around the corner to 102 Collins Street. In 1892 Ernest also



Ada Tovell, 1903

moved to Collins Street, to No. 89. Learning by apprenticeship was the only way of qualifying as a dentist in Melbourne at this time but after Ada had already been articled to her husband for some years the Australian College of Dentistry was founded in 1897 and she undertook its study program, graduating M.A.C.D. in 1900, the first woman to do so. She at once set up her own practice at 161 Collins Street. The Cyclopaedia of Victoria in 1903 described her as having 'one of the largest connections in the city. Her surgery is fitted up with all the latest electrical appliances,

and her clients include a number of the leading residents in the North-Eastern District and Ballarat'. As well as having her surgery in the city she made regular Saturday visits to many country centres. In 1903 she created another piece of history by being the first woman to obtain a Licentiate of Dental Surgery (L.D.S.) from the Dental Board of Victoria.

Meanwhile things were beginning to go pear-shaped for Ernest. In 1899 he was sued for 'misfitting teeth'. The complainant stated that he had 'promised to make her a plate for the upper jaw, containing 13 teeth, a perfect fit, for £2/10/- ... The teeth would not fit her at all, and were perfectly useless. He refused to alter them unless he got more money'. The plaintiff was asked to demonstrate the defective item and 'showed that it was practically useless'. The bench awarded the amount claimed plus £2/2/- costs. Then in 1903 Ada sued for divorce on the grounds that the 'respondent was an habitual drunkard; that he left her habitually without means of support, and cruelty during three years and

upwards'. The following month Ray advertised that 'I will in future carry on the practice of my brother, Dr. Ernest Tovell, American Dentist, at my rooms.' From then on Ernest faded from the public record.

Ada and Ernest had had three children together and in 1903 single motherhood and divorce were both seen as social calamities. She must have had very good reason to take the course she did. To add to her wretchedness her mother died in 1904. Kate too had undergone many difficulties. She had taken on the lease of a boarding house in Mary Street, St. Kilda, but the depression had hit the business hard and in 1892 she was declared insolvent. Next Ada's younger daughter, aged seven, died in 1905. From this point advertisements for her dental services appear much less often and it does seem perhaps that this was one blow too many. She continued to practise however, and to make occasional professional visits to country towns well into her fifties. She died in 1932.

## Holy Trinity

It is nearly 150 years since the opening of the first Trinity Church in November 1864. After a protracted series of negotiations Bishop Perry had finally agreed to allow a church to be built in George Street, on part of the site originally reserved for the Anglican cathedral, a site twinning the Bishopscourt reserve across the road.

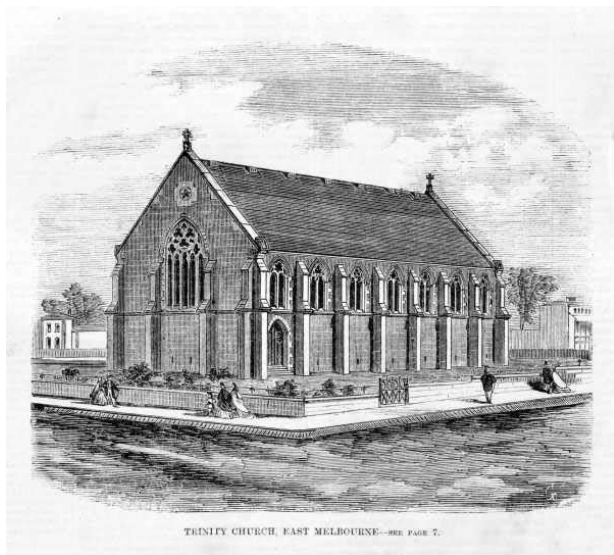
Bishop Perry was initially adamant that a parish church and a cathedral could not share the site but later agreed to a compromise, that a church could be built but after the cathedral's construction it would have to become a chapter house or library.

Leonard Terry (a local resident and no doubt a member of the

congregation) designed the bluestone building at no cost. It was roughly 90 feet long, 38 feet wide and 23 feet high and the windows were ten feet above the ground to allow for bookcases and other shelving underneath. Eventually the decision was made for the new cathedral to be built on the site of the old St. Paul's Church in Swanston Street (East Melbourne being considered too far out of town) and the way was cleared for Trinity Church's position as parish church to be formalised. It took nearly forty years until the debt owing on the church was paid off and it was able to be consecrated in 1903.

In 1905, on New Year's Day, the church burnt down. Luckily it had been well insured and a new red brick church, designed by Oakden & Ballantyne, on a new site was begun later in the year and completed in 1906. A few relics salvaged from the old ruin were incorporated into the new building, including the grand old door which now sits between the main body of the church and the Wollaston Vestry, named after the long serving first vicar. The debt was paid off quickly this time and the new church was consecrated in 1907.

But now the parish is struggling. It has considerable ongoing maintenance, pastoral and ministry obligations.



As with churches all over the world the congregation is shrinking and it is beyond its resources alone to fund these expenses. The church, whether we are members of the congregation or not, is very much part of our community. We do not want to lose it. Imagine what might take its place: perhaps a multi-storey building.

Let's support the church in any way we can, even if it is just supporting fund raising events. On Sunday 21 October at 2.00 p.m. at the church the Corda Trio will play a program of classical music for piano, violin and French horn, followed by a sumptuous afternoon tea. Entry fee: Adults \$20; concession \$15; Students \$10.

Proceeds from this concert will contribute to the Organ Restoration Fund

## Community Day Fiesta

10 a.m. – 4.00 p.m.,  
Sunday, 25 November 2012.  
At Powlett Reserve.

The East Melbourne Group is organising what they hope will be a good old-fashioned village fair. The East Melbourne Historical Society

will host a stall where we sell scones with jam and cream. If anyone can help cook or serve we would love to hear from you. Contact any of our committee members – details on page two.

## Coming Events

Wednesday, 8.00 p.m., 17 October  
AGM

Architect, Geoffrey Borrack, who has lived and worked in East Melbourne since the early 1960s, will tell us of his memories of the suburb before gentrification took hold. Geoffrey has been instrumental in saving some of our most notable houses from demolition and has played a significant part in re-shaping the homes of East Melbourne for modern living.

He has vivid memories of our area's less salubrious days.

Held at Clarendon Terrace, 210 Clarendon Street, East Melbourne

Wednesday, 5 December,  
at 6.30 p.m.  
Christmas Drinks

Keep this evening free. Once again we are able to offer a superb venue for the night. We will reveal full details nearer the time.

## Annual General Meeting

**Notice of Annual General Meeting and nomination form are enclosed with this newsletter. All financial members of the EMHS are eligible to be nominated for the committee.**

At our AGM this year the committee will propose a resolution to make changes to the rules governing membership of

the society: one is to broaden the categories of membership; and the other is to allow for changes to the cost of an annual subscription (this is not envisaged in the short term). Members attending the AGM will be asked to vote on this. More detailed information is enclosed.