

EAST MELBOURNE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER



June 2022

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

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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: Diane Clifford

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Annual subscription: \$30.00

Guests are welcome: \$5.00 per meeting

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

The Members and Committee of the East Melbourne Historical Society respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung people of the Kulin nation and pay respect to their elders past, present and to come.

President's Letter

By Tim Holland

What a beautiful Autumn we have enjoyed this year. Mostly dry but enough rain to keep everything lush and a wonderful display of Autumn colours which will continue for a few more weeks as the elms burst into their finest moments.

As the days get shorter on the approach to the winter solstice the activities of the EMHS continue. While COVID19 is still active in the community and across the country there has at least been an opening up of activities and some approximation to more normal life than we have had over the last two years.

An aspect of this pandemic that has helped mitigate the effects of the virus as compared to the last great pandemic in Australia, the influenza pandemic of the early 1920s, is the existence of a number of vaccinations that are widely available.

A significant development in heritage-at-risk matters in our area is the recent decision to approve the demolition of the Jack Dyer Stand, a decision which at time of writing was subject to further review.

On the other hand, a small win was achieved with the recent finding of the lost commemorative plaque for the original Presbyterian Ladies College. Its plaque went missing after the demolition of Dallas Brookes Hall. Finally, it has been sighted in the grounds of The Eastbourne apartment block off Albert Street.

East Melbourne has an amazing number of sites that were the locations of primary and secondary schools that either no longer exist or have been relocated to other suburbs. We are doing our best to gain some recognition of their former existence in our geographically small suburb.

In the meantime, I wish everyone well, and look forward to seeing as many as possible at our next function in June. ■

We Welcome New Members

Catherine Jones

Sally Laurie

Anna Warner ■

Alfred Fenton & Sons

By *Sylvia Black*

By 1887 Jolimont had developed into a prestigious residential precinct. Many of the generously proportioned town houses looked out over parkland, or the remnants of Lieutenant Governor La Trobe's garden. Then, what should land at the centre of this scene of tranquillity was a three-storey brick goliath, a warehouse, built boundary to boundary and completely at odds with its neighbours. This monster construction was built for Alfred Fenton & Sons, importers of china, glass and earthenware.

In the 1870s Alfred was a partner with his brother Herbert in a similar firm known as Fenton Brothers. At this point Alfred was living and working in Hanley, Staffordshire while Herbert acted as the Melbourne agent. The firm initially operated from premises at 4 Bourke Street East, opposite the GPO, before moving across the road to No 7, next door to the GPO. In 1882 the partnership was dissolved and Herbert moved up the road to run his own business while Alfred kept the original premises and renamed the firm Alfred Fenton & Sons. He had three sons: James Tunstall, Arthur and John. Alfred, it seems, was still in Hanley and entrusted the sons with the Melbourne operation.

Alfred was born in Caverswall, Staffordshire, England and had spent all his life working in potteries, starting as a potter's presser, where his job was to press wet clay into moulds, and working his way up to potter's manager. Herbert had become a crate maker like their father, making crates for the safe transport of pottery goods.

In 1884, after the split between the brothers, the old building next to the GPO was demolished and a splendid new showroom constructed, the *Argus* enthusing that 'a visit to any establishment of this kind has become almost as pleasurable as one paid to a picture gallery', so rich was the variety of objects and skills on display.

Two years later, deciding that their city warehouse was too small and land in the city too expensive, the firm purchased land in Jolimont. Not just any land, it was right in the heart of Jolimont and on it was built the old wooden house that had once belonged to Governor La Trobe and was at the time known as Jolimont House. JAB Koch was commissioned to design the new building.

It was to be built immediately to the south of Jolimont House, on a remaining portion of the old



Fenton's warehouse, at this time Bedggood's, stands out in this 1931 aerial photo of Jolimont taken from above Yarra Park looking West – photo by Charles Daniel Pratt, from SLV, Airspy collection.

garden. It was finished a few months later and its virtues were extolled in *The Herald*. The distance from the city would not be a problem. The two buildings would be in communication by telephone. There was plenty of room for drays to be loaded and unloaded at platform level, and there was a large lift driven by a gas engine. Jolimont House meanwhile became the main place of residence for the Fenton family.

At much the same time as the new warehouse was under construction Alfred took over the management of the Brook Street Potteries in Hanley and started production of earthenware goods under his own brand, A.F & S. Later, a separate company, with Alfred and Arthur as partners and which traded as the Fenton Emporium in Elizabeth Street, would use the slightly different brand of A.F & Co.

In 1894 the first signs that all perhaps was not well with the company came when the partnership between father and sons was dissolved and John was removed. However the company continued to trade under the same name. A year later the separate partnership between Alfred and son Arthur was dissolved leaving Arthur as the sole proprietor. Then in 1899 Alfred Fenton & Sons was forced into receivership. It was very much a victim of its times. Established in the boom years of the 1880s when hopes were as high as the prices, it fell foul of the crash in the 1890s. The company owed nearly £17,000 on its mortgages while the value of its real estate was only £10,000. Plus there were considerable losses on trade and large amounts of money borrowed to prop the business up. It all meant the end of the company. Fentons moved out of the Jolimont warehouse and Bedggood, the shoe manufacturer, moved in and remained there for the next seventy-odd years, until replaced by the current apartment complex.

Back in the 1880s there was minimal planning control over buildings on private land, and that which existed was negotiated between the 'responsible authority' and the developer. A land owner could pretty much do what he liked on his own land. How lucky are we now that a local resident's right to object to inappropriate development is built into the planning process. ■

Michael Weir

By Tim Holland

In a previous newsletter I did a profile on an interesting former East Melbourne resident, Tom Pedler, who was in turn a World War 1 hero, a senior officer who cracked under pressure in the trenches, and a postwar scallywag who ran the gauntlet of the law in promoting dodgy betting schemes.

In looking at the material involving Pedler I came across army archival material that disclosed a quite moving story about a fellow officer who lost his life at the time of Pedler's failure of command.

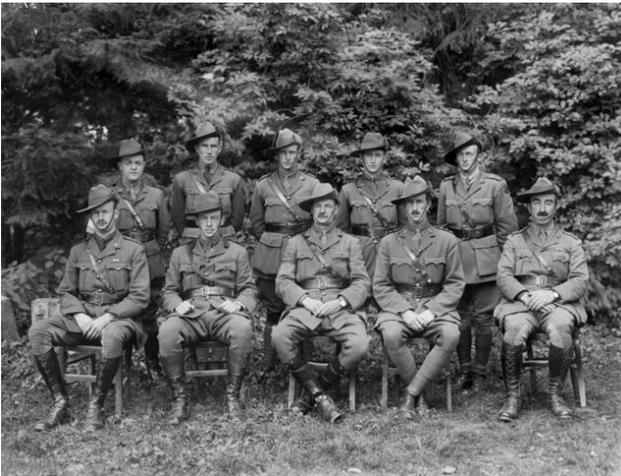
Michael John Watt Weir was born in Dunedin, New Zealand, in 1892 to Robert Weir and Elizabeth Watt. Charles Bean in his *Official History of the AIF in the 1914-18 war* makes reference to the death of Weir as follows: "this famous leader had served in the ranks of the 7th Battalion at the Gallipoli Landing and at Lone Pine, where he was wounded. He managed to return to the front at

Pozieres by getting Lt Alec Raws to bring him from the base as his batman. He later refused a post on the brigade staff.”

This was a strong endorsement by Bean of the character and qualities of Weir. It indicates that Lt Weir had a reputation that would have been well known, and it was highly unusual for Bean to single out a junior officer for such praise.

Michael Weir enlisted very early in the war (20 August 1914) having moved to Melbourne from New Zealand to work as a labourer. His residence was the Clare Castle Hotel in Exhibition St. He was 5'5" tall, weighed 146lbs and was of Presbyterian denomination.

As mentioned in passing above, at Gallipoli Weir suffered “shock” as well as receiving a gunshot wound to the head and a bout of enteric fever. Unusually he was given 3 months recuperation leave in Australia after all this.



Staff of the 6th Infantry Brigade, Lt Michael Weir is back row, second left. – Australian War Memorial

Weir rejoined his unit in France. He was “specially mentioned in Sir Douglas Haig’s despatch of 7 April 1918”, and was also Mentioned in Despatches for his actions on 5 March 1918. He was further “congratulated” that on the night of 17/18 May “he had charge of the parties covering the launching of the two bridges across the Ancre. He carried this out with utter disregard of personal danger and later on made a reconnaissance of a farm...gaining much valuable information.”

On the night of 17/18 August 1918 Weir’s 23rd Battalion was involved in heavy fighting in the Amiens area amid the final climactic last hundred days of the conflict. Major Pedler had been put in charge of a company after a long absence from the front in order to see whether he had what it took to take on the leadership of a battalion given that he was theoretically next in line for such a role in a casualty-ravaged officer cohort. Senior command were wary as to whether he was up to it and stated that they wanted to see Pedler in action.

Sadly for all concerned Pedler was found wanting, and the report of the subsequent inquiry into his conduct makes difficult reading as it graphically describes the chaos of the situation he and his troops found themselves in.

When the Germans counter-attacked against Pedler’s company Pedler was seen to run back from the scene of the operations in the forward trenches. An officer stated that “to all members of the

Company this was most demoralising, and called forth some strong language from men in the ranks.” Another officer reported troops and NCOs as saying that “Major Pedler behaved in a most cowardly manner and was a cur.”

Lt Weir was reported as saying “don’t worry...I will see that the ***** is reported to the Commanding Officer.” Weir then went forward in an attempt to rally his defending troops but was badly wounded and subsequently died of wounds.

The inquiry into all this found that Pedler was “unfitted for command of men in the field”; he had his commission terminated and was immediately sent home to Australia.

Michael Weir made the ultimate sacrifice in this action, but reading the reports in the service records of Weir and Pedler it is not hard to believe that the soldiers that survived the war would have carried significant mental and psychological baggage from things that they witnessed during the conflict, and that’s without taking into account any physical war wounds that might have been incurred. The First World War must have cast a long shadow over the physical and mental health of the Australian population.

In August 1920 Mr P A McWhinney, manager of the Lake Boga branch of the National Bank in the Mallee, wrote to Army Records requesting the address of the next of kin of Michael Weir. McWhinney said he “could furnish some details” to his parents of the death of Lt Weir “which after 2 years would not distress them to the same extent as when their loss was new.” McWhinney was a stretcher-bearer who, with one other, carried the dying soldier to the medical station, with both carriers themselves receiving wounds in the process.

Weir’s file also includes a request in 1920 from a newly-married woman living in North Richmond for two copies of a photograph of his grave in the war cemetery on the Somme, and one can only guess at her connection to Weir.

Not the least striking part of Michael Weir’s unusually large service file is a type-written copy of a letter intended for his father in Dunedin, and drafted at the time of his enlistment.

His letter refers to having previously been at odds with his father, including over “that Church incident in the first place”, and he also states that “compulsory training” also helped to get him out of New Zealand. He said that he had been “kicked from pillar to post” during his three years in Victoria, and like the prodigal son “sometimes without a great deal to eat”. He admitted to being “blessed or cursed with a great deal of pig-headedness”, but wrote that “the only person I consider myself indebted to is yourself.”

The purpose of the letter is to make peace with his father and to say that he had turned things around completely and was not only a regular attendee at church of his own accord, but had volunteered for military service after “only now beginning to realise the duty he has neglected.”

The letter is endearingly self-reflective and interestingly has the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son as a reference to his own redemption from a life of dissipation. It provides an unexpected insight into the thinking of someone who while being a bit of a wild colonial boy did absorb the zeitgeist of

the time of fealty to God, King and Country and through his personal qualities proved himself to be an outstanding soldier in the service of Empire. ■

Ladies' College - Principals Mr and Mrs Vieusseux

By Sylvia Black

In the nineteenth century East Melbourne had more than its fair share of schools. It seems there was one in every block, sometimes more. The bigger church schools such as Scotch College, St Patrick's College and Presbyterian Ladies College were housed in large purpose-built structures, usually on land granted to them in the early days. But there were numerous private schools run often by a husband and wife, or a widow and daughters in a house adapted for the purpose, sometimes their own house, sometimes rented.

One of the longest running and more ambitious of these private schools was Ladies' College run by Mr and Mrs Vieusseux (pronounced 'view sue'). Julie Elizabeth Agnes Vieusseux, nee Matthieu, was born in The Netherlands in 1820, and was of Huguenot descent. Julie was educated in Paris. She married Lewis Vieusseux, an English civil engineer, architect and surveyor, also of Huguenot ancestry, in 1849. Early in 1852 the couple arrived in Melbourne, with their two infant sons.

Julie was an accomplished painter and initially set up as a portrait painter and art teacher. Among her few surviving works is a portrait of fellow artist, friend and East Melbourne resident, Eugene von Guerard. It hangs in the German Club in Prahran. Meanwhile Lewis endeavoured to establish himself as an architect. But success was elusive and the couple decided to open a school for young ladies. It opened in 1857 in Victoria Parade on part of the land now occupied by St Vincent's Hospital. Lewis and Julie Vieusseux taught English, French and German language and literature classes and Julie also taught drawing, painting and craft and ran the boarding school.

By 1860 it had become so successful that they moved the school to larger premises: Valetta, 206 Clarendon Street, East Melbourne. In January 1858 the Vieusseux's eight year old son had gone missing from a family picnic in the Dandenong Ranges. His body was not found until two years later. That the two parents had the mental strength to forge ahead with their new enterprise speaks of amazing resilience.

The school now advertised the assistance of a number of visiting and resident teachers who contributed their skills in natural science, pianoforte, vocal music, elocution, dancing and calisthenics. School fees were set at 'Day Pupils, senior, 4 guineas; junior, 3 guineas, including French and German; Resident Boarders, senior, 20, Junior, 15 guineas per quarter'.

The school records still exist in the care of the family and Marjorie Theobald had access to them when writing her book 'Knowing Women' (1996). She ascertained that in 1863 the school had 103 girls. This may have been a peak year as in the twenty-six years of the school's existence it had a total of 886 pupils, an average of 34.

In 1868 the school moved again, this time to Brighton, but returned to East Melbourne at the beginning of 1872 to rent a pair of newly built three-storey terrace houses at 166-168 Clarendon

Street, now part of the site occupied by the Epworth-Freemasons' Hospital. This put the school immediately next door to another popular school known as Ormiston run by the Singleton sisters, daughters of doctor and philanthropist, John Singleton.

Advertisements for the school claimed that, 'Every year since 1872 inclusive, pupils of Ladies' College have passed the Matriculation and Civil Service Examinations at the Melbourne University'. Of these only one local student has been identified: Emma Harriet Nunn, the daughter of Philip Henry Nunn who lived at Claverings, 120 Powlett Street and was a partner in the old department store, Buckley & Nunn. Emma passed the Civil Service exams in 1879. It is worth



166-168 Ladies' College, Clarendon Street, the two terrace houses to the right of the picture - photo c1925, SLV.

noting that girls were not eligible to sit the matriculation and civil service exams until 1871. Passing still did not qualify them to enrol at Melbourne University. This did not happen until 1880.

Early in 1878 the school advised that, 'Mr Edward Vieusseux, of Melbourne University, and for the last two years one of the masters of the Church of England Grammar School, Geelong, will in future have charge of the Matriculation Class'. Only a few weeks later his mother, the indomitable Julie, died. This, along with the establishment of Presbyterian Ladies College in 1875 and the ongoing success of Ormiston, sent the school on a downward slide.

In what appears to be an attempt to stall off the inevitable a new ad appeared in the papers from 1880,

The premises occupy an elevated and healthy situation, fronting the Fitzroy Gardens, and overlooking the bay. A limited number of young ladies are received as resident boarders, for whose accommodation a large private sittingroom is provided, containing select library, and various indoor games for recreation and amusement. All the seats in the class-rooms are furnished with backs.

The school moved back to Valetta for one final year before closing in 1883 ■

Mirka Mora and the Balzac Restaurant

By Gay Sussex

Once we had the six o'clock swill. Pubs had to close at 6pm so men – and it was generally men – raced to down as many beers as they could before closure. There was very little civilised drinking.

Then there was Mirka and Georges Mora with their European ideas of hospitality and everything changed. They espoused civilised dining and opened their restaurant in 1958 at 58 Wellington Parade East Melbourne.

The new restaurant licence introduced in 1960 allowed alcohol to be served with food. Balzac was the first restaurant to obtain this licence in Victoria, and it allowed alcohol to be served with meals until 10 p.m.



Mirka Mora mural uncovered by Tippler & Co proprietor, Gus McAlister when restoring the old Balzac restaurant - photo, Graham Shepherd

For while Balzac was the centre of all things stylish. I can remember going there in my pale pink mini skirt and recently teased up hair. So chic, I thought at the time.

Recently a bit of this history resurfaced with the discovery of a mural painted by Mirka herself. It had been hidden for fifty years behind a plaster wall and features humans holding animals.

Today this site houses the restaurant Tippler and Co and the proprietor, Gus McAlister, is justifiably proud of the Mora mural. Why don't you order a meal

and admire this work while you are there?

The Moras have continued to contribute to cultural life in Melbourne. Tiriell Mora played the gormless lawyer in *The Castle* Australia's favourite movie, Philippe Mora is a film director; and William Mora an art dealer. ■

Obituary of Joan Lee

By Lindy Priest (daughter)

Joan Lee, who died on 10 January 2022 aged 97, lived at 53 Agnes Street Jolimont. She first lived at 21 Agnes Street, Jolimont in 1934 when she was then opposite what was then the Bedgood Shoe Factory. The shoe factory's employees used to taunt Joan and her sister Joy so the windows on the factory were painted out by Mr Bedgood.

Her aunts May and Madeline Moorhead lived at 157 Wellington Parade South with her cousin Mary. Mary Maxwell lived her whole life at 157 Wellington Parade South until she died in 2014. It was bequeathed to Joan by Mary and was then renovated by Joan's daughter.

At that time Governor LaTrobe's College and Garden, owned by the Bedgoods, were still in Agnes Street until 1963 when it moved to its present location in the Domain.

Her upbringing was austere coming of age during the depression. She attended Yarra Park Primary School from 1934 for two years and then won a scholarship to University High School. Joan left school early to get a job to help support the family. So Joan started working at Myers. Her brother Bill was in New Guinea with the Australian Army.

With a small sum of money she saved she took up ballet with the Borovansky Ballet Company which was a founding classical ballet company in Melbourne. Her love for ballet remained with her all her life.

She met her husband John at St Mary's East St Kilda at a dance while he was at school at CBC St Kilda. They married in St Patrick's Cathedral in 1946. John was a representative for an English steel company based in Sheffield and later received a CBE for services to industry.

After living in Sydney and Melbourne suburbs, they moved back to Jolimont in 1969. John was able to operate his business from home and his company Machinery Indents was conducted from 64 Jolimont Street, which they then renovated.

They were both actively involved with the East Melbourne Group and the East Melbourne Historical Society. They knew the many personalities of East Melbourne and when younger Joan would go to Effie Ball at Ball and Welsh and would have tea with her in Wellington Parade South.

Joan and John bought 53 Agnes Street in 1984 and undertook a major renovation with East Melbourne architect Geoff Borrack where she remained until November 2021. She was concerned that it be sold promptly because of the world situation and that there may be a war and on the eve of the sale of 53 Agnes Street Russia invaded Ukraine.

Quiet, dignified and independent to the end, she could often be seen attending to her rose garden.

She was the last of her generation and she felt very alone. She missed her husband John who had died nine years earlier. Joan died quietly in her sleep on 10 January 2022. Her funeral was held at St Patrick's Cathedral and her old family friend Archbishop Emeritus Dennis Hart presided. She is buried at Malmsbury Cemetery. ■

A Covid Moment

By Graham Shepherd

We have all had those Covid moments, if not the dreaded contagion itself. The East Melbourne General Store, like many other establishments, has experienced a dramatic shift from cash to credit card payments, even for small items. The other day a regular customer drew out from her purse an item with quite sufficient credit to cover her purchase and held it against the payment machine. Unfortunately, the ultra-modern machine did not recognise the ten dollar note held earnestly and honestly against the reader. Needless to say, the purchase was honoured by Lisette's staff. ■

PLC Plaque Found

By Gay Sussex

Here it is, the hard-to-find PLC plaque. It is under the tree at the front centre of The Eastbourne apartment block off Albert Street. It is in a raised garden bed, behind a low hedge and needs a ladder to see it. It needs a good weeding and brush down and definitely, a more accessible location.



Special thanks to Roger Smith and Graham Ryles who pointed EMHS sleuths in the right direction.

PLC Plaque, hidden away in The Eastbourne garden - Photo, Graham Sussex

The Presbyterian Ladies College occupied this location, between Victoria Parade and Albert Streets from 1875 to 1958.

Some photos of the school taken about 1953 were donated to the EMHS by Myra Anderson. You can see them on the EMHS website at <https://emhs.org.au/catalogue/emdf0100>. ■

Coming Events

7:30pm Wednesday 15 June 2022 — The Victorian Artists Society

Dr Graeme Williams OAM has been researching the Melbourne art scene since 1851 through the prism of the Victorian Artists' Society, 430 Albert Street, East Melbourne. He will share with us his journey through this vibrant slice of Melbourne's history.

7:30pm Wednesday 17 August 2022 — John Glover and Me

Local resident, Dr Susan Barker, has a family connection to the artist, John Glover. She will talk about his life and work from a personal perspective. Members free, non-members: \$5.00.

At: East Melbourne Library, 122 George Street, East Melbourne. ■

Cover image: Autumn Colours, Powlett Reserve, May 2022 - Photo, Graham Shepherd