



Vanishing Melbourne

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MANY GRAND PROPERTIES HAVE DISAPPEARED FROM THE STREETS OF EAST MELBOURNE BUT STILL WE DO NOT SEEM TO HAVE LEARNED THE LESSON. HISTORIC VICTORIA MARY RYLLIS CLARK

East Melbourne may be one of the smallest suburbs in the city, but with 226 of its 600 buildings listed on the register of the national estate, it is one of the most historically significant locations in Australia. This number is higher than that for Battery Point in Hobart, the Rocks in Sydney, Fremantle in Western Australia and North Adelaide in South Australia.

These places in other states are now well protected as tourist attractions, yet members of the East Melbourne Group fight a constant battle against inappropriate development. The group is at present opposing the demolition of the 1890s bluestone ballroom behind Mosspenock Mansion in Clarendon Street, built in 1881.

“Adding ballrooms to the backs of houses in boom time Melbourne was a reflection of the social world of that era,” says Margaret Wood, president of the East Melbourne Association. Sadly, getting rid of them is a sign of our own.

Among the marvellous East Melbourne buildings that have been lost is Stanford House, also in Clarendon Street, demolished in 1934 to make way for the first wing of the Freemasons Hospital. Previously known as Eaglestone Villa, it was the home of Henry Cooke, East Melbourne's first private resident. Cooke, with his brother, John, founded The Age newspaper in 1854.

The Cookes had come from New Zealand in the 1840s, established themselves as successful traders and purchased eight allotments in the first official land sale in East Melbourne in 1852.

They imported six prefabricated houses from New Zealand. According to architectural historian, Professor Miles Lewis, these houses had a distinct New Zealand look, with their long dormer windows, big rooms, hip roofs and spacious verandas. Three of them still survive.

Henry Cooke and his wife settled in East Melbourne in 1853, their nearest neighbours being Bishop Charles Perry and his family in the newly built Bishops Court. This was a palace compared to the small timber cottage across the way in Jolimont occupied by the leader of the newly independent colony, Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe.

The well-to-do quickly snapped up East Melbourne. All trace of the long-established Aboriginal camp by the swamp in the future Darling Square disappeared apart from a few scarred trees. One of the new arrivals in the suburb in the 1850s was journalist David Syme, who settled in George Street. In 1856 he and his brother, Ebenezer, bought The Age from John and Henry Cooke.

In 1869, Henry Cooke sold Eaglestone Villa to a colourful character called Thomas Welford Stanford. Stanford was a Californian who dropped out of medical school to run a store with his older brother, Leland, in Sacramento.

When the store was sold, Leland became involved with the development of the Californian railways and eventually became a senator and a founder of Stanford University. Thomas, in the meantime, sailed to Melbourne in March 1860 on the vessel Mary Bangs, with a stock of kerosene lamps.

A miner returned from the Victorian goldfields had told him they were unknown in the colony, so he purchased a huge quantity and took them to the other side of the world. His lit lamps were set up in the window of a city store and attracted so many people the police were called. Within days of his arrival, Stanford made a second fortune but had suffered so much from seasickness on the voyage out that he never returned home.

Stanford bought Eaglestone Villa when he married Minnie Wilhelmina Watt, a young Canadian woman, nine years later. He commissioned architect Robert Elkins to turn Cooke's graceful home into a mansion, adding elaborate extensions including a private observatory and a formal garden.

Within a year of moving into the house, 23-year-old Minnie died in childbirth. Stanford never married again, finding comfort in spiritualism and building up his extensive collections of Australian paintings, books and birds. His paintings included works by Buvelot, Chevalier, von Guérard and Glover.

In spite of feeling an exile, Stanford lived a rich and long life in Melbourne, establishing the Harbinger of Light spiritualist magazine and serving as American consul, as well as a long-distance trustee of Stanford University. He continued to import popular goods into Victoria such as Singer sewing machines and condensed milk.

After the loss of some valuable possessions in a fire, Thomas Stanford sent his art collection to Stanford University for safekeeping as well as to be enjoyed by a wider audience than in Melbourne. As fate would have it, the paintings were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

There is an interesting connection between Thomas Stanford and East Melbourne's house museum, The Johnston Collection. Bi Johnston's mother, Louise Friedrichs, was a scullery maid at Stanford House for some years before she married Robert Johnston in 1909.

It may well be that her stories of living in a grand house in East Melbourne surrounded by beautiful things gave her son his burning ambition to have this for himself. Curiously, Louise Friedrichs claimed to be a distant relative of the Stanfords.

Thomas Stanford died in East Melbourne in 1918, at the age of 86. Stanford House continued to be a private home for a few years before being acquired by the Church of England, which turned it into the Arms of Jesus Babies' Home. And so it stayed until the Freemasons bought it and built their art deco hospital. Ironically this was itself included on the Heritage Victoria Register last April.

The hospital, like Stanford House before it, has a marvellous position in Clarendon Street, facing the Fitzroy Gardens. Opened in 1937 as an "intermediate" hospital to relieve pressure on general hospitals and in particular to help Masons who had fallen on hard times, it was supported by donations and bequests from wealthier members of the masonic community.

According to Winston Burchett's East Melbourne 1837-1977 People Places Problems, the hospital was first intended for East Brighton. However, the Depression, which halted local development there, and pressure from doctors who wanted a hospital closer to Collins Street led the Masonic Lodge to look for a site in East Melbourne.

They bought Stanford House and Rosebank, the property next door.

The first wing of the new hospital built on the site of Stanford House opened in 1937, the second wing, built on the Rosebank site, opened in 1958.

Cities have to change and often it seems aspects of the past only survive by chance. Henry Cooke saw the newspaper he started go from strength to strength; Thomas Stanford's precious works of art all perished.

The house they both lived in remains only a memory captured in images and stories inspiring present residents of East Melbourne to save for posterity the remaining historic fabric of their neighbourhood.

FAST FACTS

The Freemasons Hospital is in Clarendon Street, East Melbourne between Grey Street and Albert Street opposite the Fitzroy Gardens. A personal tour of the historic suburb can be made with the aid of East Melbourne Walkabout by Winston H. Burchett. For further information on Stanford House contact The Johnston Collection, tel: 9416 2515.
