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Excursion to Jolimont

(1838 to 1955)

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(Read by Mr. A. J. Hopton, October 22nd, 1955)

Reverting to the dawn of Jolimont's history, we must refer to the almost legendary existence of a native police camp which, under the supervision of Superintendent Christian L. J. de Villiers, is said to have existed in 1838 on a site almost bordering upon Jolimont, approximately on the site of the present Olympic Park.

Also, at an early date, Captain William Lonsdale occupied a building (in this case beyond the western boundary of Jolimont) erected for him by Charles F. le Roux, Clerk of Works, approximately 150 yards to the southeast of the present junction of Flinders and Spring Streets, the actual work being done by 25 convicts. A fragment still existed in 1866.

We may now turn to the hill of Jolimont itself, with feelings of reverence for the memory of its principal first inhabitant, Charles Joseph La Trobe, who arrived in Melbourne in 1839, as Superintendent of Port Phillip.

A cultured and travelled man, Mr. La Trobe was accompanied by his wife (Sophie de Mont Mollin) and their child Agnes.

Mr. La Trobe first occupied three lodgements in the Batman Hill area in rapid succession, eventually placing his house upon this hill, after he had purchased on June 10th, 1840, an area of 12 acres and 2 roods, at the upset price of £20 per acre.

The area was described as a slope of sunny land, well grassed, and running down to the tree-fringed bends of the Yarra, the front of the house facing the river (in early days the Yarra's course led a part of the river nearer to Jolimont than at present). A visitor to the

house said: "It stands in a very pretty garden and is surrounded by trees on every side. When you come out of his gates you would imagine yourself in a gentleman's park."

Indeed, a study of the Edward Bateman collection of pictures of Jolimont at the later stage of 1854 demonstrates the impossibility of painting a word-picture of the beauty of the La Trobe house and garden in its prime — extensive buildings also are depicted, rockeries, greenhouse, a huge haystack, stables and coach house with carriage, a water shed with water cart, and a detached cottage.

La Trobe's house became the centre of social activities, the chief of these occurring on May 13th, 1849, when the La Trobes entertained Sir Charles Augustus Fitz-Roy, Governor of New South Wales, with officers of H.M.S. *Havartnah*, and, as the Press stated, "the cream of Melbourne's aristocracy."

An early secretary of Mr. La Trobe's was Edward Lionel Lee, and at a slightly later date he possessed a clerical staff of Messrs. A. Holmes and C. Holmer, with a messenger. Another secretary was Edward Bell.

In 1848 the elements provided a disturbing influence in the Jolimont area, for on October 14th a serious flood isolated Richmond, and swept over the present Fitzroy Gardens site and the Government Paddock (the latter conforming roughly with the boundaries of the present Yarra Park).

Domestic events at Jolimont included the birth of Eleanore Sophia, Mary Cecilia, and Charles Albert La Trobe.

The separation of Victoria involved the elevation of Mr. La Trobe to "His Excellency Charles Joseph La Trobe Esq., Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria." In 1852 Major Norman Campbell became his private secretary, and Lewis Charles Conran his aide-de-camp. Major and Mrs. Campbell with a maid, Ann Goodwin, took up residence in the vicinity of the La Trobe's house, probably in the "detached cottage" depicted by Edward Bateman.

During the period when Bishop and Mrs. Perry were

awaiting the completion of "Bishopscourt" in East Melbourne, they occupied for some time a cottage described as "a small house built on Mr. La Trobe's property."

This building, illustrated in "The Chronicles of Early Melbourne" and by Edward Bateman, stood exactly to the east of, and adjoining, La Trobe's house (it was demolished in the 1930s). Its position caused it to appear in Palmer Street, facing the rear wall of Jolimont Square, a gate connecting it with La Trobe's former house.

Mrs. Perry called the building "La Trobe's upper house," and stated that it consisted of two sittingrooms, three bedrooms, a store, a small kitchen with two cupboards formerly occupied by maids, a coachhouse and stable. A verandah occupied three and a half sides of the house. A flower and kitchen garden adjoined the house, and from there Mrs. Perry often observed, to the east, 12 young Government police cadets, in neat uniforms with red facings, performing their mounted drill. (The Mounted Police Barracks, demolished about 1880, stood where the Richmond State School now stands.)

The Perrys joined the kitchen to the house by a covered way, built two servants' rooms, and cultivated chrysanthemums and geraniums, but their garden withered under the terrible heat of Black Thursday, 1851. Mrs. Perry complained of the stifling heat, and regretted the high cost of hospitality, with turkeys at 30s., milk at 2s. 6d. a quart, and butter at 3s. a pound.

Almost 80 years later an occupant described the house as having a high fence, pretty garden and lawn, with a huge pear tree. A wide verandah had large glassed doors fitted with double shutters, and Mrs. Perry's hitching post still stood outside the front door, which faced the south. The library was still a handsome room with huge fireplace, and walls panelled with dark wood.

Mr. La Trobe departed from Jolimont, and Melbourne, in May, 1854, and in August Sir Robert Nickle, Knight, and Knight Companion of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order, arrived from Sydney as Military Commandant. A new residence for the Governor of Victoria,

Toorak House, at Toorak, was leased and furnished by the Government in 1854.

Sir Robert Nickle brought a staff of Lieutenant-Colonel Macarthur as Deputy Adjutant General, Captain H. J. King as Aide-de-Camp, Lieutenant W. T. F. A. Wallace as Assistant Military Secretary, W. Lucas as Principal Medical Officer, Staff Surgeon G. M. Webster. Mrs. Lucas with three children, Lady Nickle, Mrs. Webster, clerks and servants, completed the party. For office accommodation and headquarters, the staff took over the building in Collins Street East. now adjoining the Freemasons' Hall.

Sir Robert Nickle himself proceeded to Jolimont, more than probably to Jolimont House, as we now call the La Trobe's house, just vacated by the La Trobe household. At the same time, we may assume, with reasonable certainty, that Colonel McArthur proceeded to "the detached cottage" formerly occupied by Major Campbell.

Sir Robert Nickle, on the occasion of the Eureka rising, conducted a large force of troops and bluejackets to Ballarat, but arrived too late for action. Faced with the task of administering martial law, he did so with such tact and graciousness that he won the respect and esteem of all at the goldfields.

He died, on May 26th, 1855, at Jolimont House, and the interment on the 28th provided a pageant of mourning of a magnitude unique in Jolimont's history. Dense crowds lined the route from Jolimont via St. Peter's Church to the Melbourne General Cemetery, and while the funeral procession formed at Jolimont, 13 minute guns were fired from the Royal Princes Bridge (or Emigration) Barracks.

Through the foliage of the gums in the Government Police Paddock could be distinguished the scarlet of the 40th Regiment (2nd Somersetshire), the 12th Regiment also being on parade. The cobalt blue of the Governor's suite contrasted with the sombre hue of the police and civilians. The coffin was conveyed to a waiting gun carriage by soldiers, the carriage being drawn by four horses with feather trappings.

There were present, among many others, the Gov-

error, the Attorney General, Judge Barry, the Executive Council, the Mayor of Melbourne, Mr. John Pascoe Fawkner, the Melbourne Volunteer Rifle Corps, and naval officers. To quote an eye-witness: "A gloomy sentiment was ever suggested to the mind by the tolling of the death-bell from the nearby church, peals at measured intervals throughout the wintry air. The day was cold and cheerless, and the wind rustled mournfully among the waving trees as among the bended plumes of the horses destined to bear the veteran soldier to his grave. Immediately on the conclusion of the service the guns thundered out the parting honours above the ear, to which their sound had so long been familiar in less peaceful scenes, but which was no longer conscious of the tribute they paid him."

(Sir Robert had joined the Army at a very early age, had sustained wounds at Buenos Aires in 1807, was twice wounded in the Peninsula War and again in the American War of 1812.)

Colonel E. Macarthur now, succeeded to the position of Military Commandant, and appears to have taken up residence at Jolimont House, while we may assume that his Assistant Military Secretary, Captain John T. F. Boyd, of the 11th Regiment, took up quarters at the already-mentioned "detached cottage."

Colonel Macarthur, during 1856, performed the duties of Lieutenant-Governor, possibly residing at Toorak House, Toorak, during that period.

The year 1858 appears to have been an eventful one for Jolimont, and the interesting problem of Jolimont Square may now be dealt with.

The Square does not appear under its own name in the Directory until 1864, although the Directory of 1861 very vaguely acknowledges its existence.

1858 may fairly definitely be named as the year of its birth, for, on December 22nd, 1858, appears the advertisement: "Houses and Land To Let. The remaining residence in Jolimont Square, eight rooms, kitchen and pantry."

On February 4th, 1858, James Bonham had called for

tenders for plastering and plumbing work, labour only, on five houses, also for fixing castiron gutters.

On February 15th Bonham advertised to water 'carriers, requiring tenders for supplying the new buildings with water.

On April 16th appeared an advertisement for tenders for making doors and sashes.

Various advertisements for tenders appear during 1858, in which the terms "Jolimont" and "Jolimont Square" are used in a loose manner, but sufficient evidence emerges to state that 1858 is the date of the Square.

Succeeding early advertisements may now be quoted:

February 11th, 1859. "Board and Lodging, Jolimont Square, Richmond Park. Private apartments with board. The first house at right hand side of entrance."

August 27th. 1860. "Jolimont Square, a ten-roomed house, with stables and coachhouse, will be vacant after the 31st instant."

September 1st, 1860. "Board and Lodging, Jolimont Square, East Melbourne, partial board and residence, private family."

These particulars prove that Mr. La Trobe was never connected with Jolimont &mare, having left Melbourne four years before it existed.

The "military life," so-called, at Jolimont, comprised the residence in La Trobe's former house, Jolimont House, of the two Commandants in turn, Sir Robert Nickle and Colonel Macarthur, and the incidental movements of their staffs. this period extending only from the middle of May, 1854, to 1858, in which year began the turning of Jolimont into a private residential suburb.

Apparently, therefore, from its inception this &mare has had a purely civilian existence, but definite facts are sufficient to lend an air of romance to this old-world enclosure. unique in Melbourne. Imagination may people it with its succession of inmates and visitors in the past, some commonplace, some picturesque—its drive has re-

ceived the horse and the carriage, and subsequently the motor car—its buildings have echoed discussions, from the Indian Mutiny period to the Atomic period.

A recital of the names of the inmates throughout the past 97 years would be possible, but tedious; its history contains material for a story in itself.

As stated, 1858 was a year of extreme activity in the entire area of Jolimont, in addition to the rising of the Square. In September appeared the advertisement—"To let, Jolimont House, this well-known family villa, the property of C. J. La Trobe, Esq., and lately the residence of Major-General Macarthur. Stands in grounds and garden covering an area of 2 acres 25 perches, and is replete with every comfort. William Green, 4 Collins Street, West."

In the same month "Tenders wanted for felling, stumping and forming about 16 chains of road at Jolimont. The timber to be the property of the contractor. Tenders received on the premises, Jolimont."

Again, "Jolimont, for sale by private contract, that superior family villa recently in the occupation of Captain Boyd, and forming part of the Jolimont property belonging to C. J. La Trobe Esq. The ground on which the cottage stands has a frontage of 173 feet 6 inches to Wellington Parade, with a depth of 200 feet equal to 3 roods and 9 perches, all fenced and having roads on three sides. Terms liberal. Apply Wm. Green."

The above villa appears to be identical with that villa hitherto referred to as "the detached cottage" which was occupied by Major Campbell, Colonel Macarthur and Captain Boyd in turn, and, pending further proof, vague tradition assigns its position to that site now occupied by the Herschells Films Proprietary Limited in Agnes Street.

Proceeding into the early period of Jolimont's history as a residential suburb. At La Trobe Villa in Jolimont the brilliant though brief career of one of Melbourne's most prominent actresses of the late '60s came to an end. Born in Malines in Belgium, of French parentage, she enjoyed a distinguished stage career in Melbourne,

appearing chiefly at the old Theatre Royal and Haymarket Theatre. She became a vital force in dramatic and musical circles, and included association with the famous Shakespearian actor, Walter Montgomery, playing Juliet to his Romeo. She possessed great talent, was ambitious to a superlative degree, but, says a writer of the period: "Her ambitions culminated in an intense desire to shine in life with the blazing trail of a comet, rather than the calm radiance of a fixed star." On an October day in 1868 a party of Jolimont street workmen were entranced by the strains of a glorious singing voice proceeding from a nearby villa, but on the following day several of their number were impressed into a coroner's jury in the same house, for the young singer had ended her own life, under circumstances which caused a press writer to declare, "Of all the thrilling stories to be told in the days to come of our young life as a nation, that of Mademoiselle Marie St. Denis (to quote her stage name) the actress, will be the strangest."

Much of the story lies in the letters found clasped in her hands, in one of which she sent to her hostess at La Trobe Villa, ". . . many, many kisses, more than my mother have you been to Marie."

In 1879 a minor misfortune attacked Jolimont, in the shape of a typhoid epidemic. The suburb was then described as being "pleasant and healthfully situated," but a defective milk supply resulted in one death and 20 cases.

In the year 1899 the factory of Messrs. Bedggood and Co. was established in Agnes Street (Messrs. J. C. R. Bedggood, R. H. Cooke, W. F. Greenwood, D. T. Bedggood) . The firm occupied a portion of the former La Trobe estate, but has found it possible to preserve a small portion of the La Trobe residence, Jolimont House, in a small reserve and garden.

In 1906 vanished from Wellington Parade the famous National Gymnasium, formerly supervised by Gustav Techow. Adjoining it had been the Victorian Volunteer Engineers' Depot, both abutting upon the northern boundary of the East Melbourne Cricket Ground-these three institutions have long since been absorbed by the Jolimont railway yards.

It must be recorded that a section of underground tunnel exists at Jolimont. Lined with bluestone blocks and about 5 feet high, it appears to commence at ground level under the La Trobe house, running in a westerly direction downhill towards and under Agnes Street. Under the corresponding house in Agnes Street is a narrow passage merging in three places into small compartments, and, if this be a continuation of the tunnel, the same is blocked under the western side of Agnes Street at this point. The Postmaster General's Department and Metropolitan Board, of Works state 'that the work is not of their departments.

To conclude. This small hill, unobtrusive, yet so close to our thickly populated city, still bears the named bestowed upon it before the Colony of Victoria existed. It is most famous as the former residence of one of Melbourne's noblest citizens, and two of its streets bear the names of his children, a third bearing the name of Sir James Frederick Palmer.

To seek the monument of La Trobe, look to the north and to the south of this hill, to the beautiful public gardens which were the result of his planning of so long ago, as he wandered in his own lovely garden here. It is fitting that this meeting should be, in a way, a pilgrimage to his former home, to honour his memory, as he thought of our future well-being, a century ago.