

BISHOPSCOURT

Bishopscourt, East Melbourne, has been the residence of all Melbourne's Anglican Bishops and Archbishops since 1853. Lambeth Palace, London, on the other hand, has only been a residence of under half of the Archbishops of Canterbury i.e. since the twelfth century .

Charles Perry, Melbourne's first Bishop, landed with Mrs Perry on 23 January 1848 and for the first six weeks after their arrival they resided at the Southern Cross Hotel at 165 Bourke Street West. At the end of this period and until a suitable residence could be provided, the Perrys arranged to rent a cottage, "Upper Jolimont" built on Superintendent La Trobe's property, "Jolimont. Though this accommodation was somewhat limited, the house had the advantage of proximity to the Superintendent's "cultured and amiable family." Here the Perrys settled for five years, alternating their time in Melbourne with trips to outlying stations and settlements.

Meanwhile, in 1848, in accordance with an arrangement made by the Secretary for the Colonies in London, the Government in Sydney appropriated £2,000 towards the erection of a bishop's residence and also reserved a site of two acres of land in a very convenient situation within the town boundaries. Perry could have had five acres beyond the boundaries but he wisely determined, in his own interest and that of his successors, that an easy walk from all parts of Melbourne was an essential condition for a bishop's home.

Perry wrote thus in reference to the proposed residence:

.It must be recollected also that the office of a bishop requires him to exercise hospitality; and besides the direct ministry of the Word and example of a holy life, there is scarcely any means more conducive than this to the spiritual well being of the people ever whom he is placed. My conviction of the truth of this has made me often regret the smallness of our present cottage, which allows me only to see a very few friends at a time and prevents as accommodating - anyone for the night`.

Though the land grant did not issue until February 1851, James Blackburn, it would seem, was commissioned to design the 'Bishop's Palace' in 1849. Blackburn had been convicted of forgery and transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1833. There he was employed immediately in the Colonial Architect's Office, was responsible for major public works and buildings in that island and received a free pardon in 1841. In April 1849, he moved to Melbourne where he is best remembered as the designer of the Yean Yean System, Melbourne's first water supply.

His design was in the Italianate style, of which he was a leading proponent, with a pillared arched loggia and a square tower. Professor Miles Lewis, who has made a special study of Bishopscourt and to whom I am indebted for much of this, has written:

The fact that Melbourne is the most Italianate city in Australia is probably attributable to the facts that Toorak House (the first Government House) was Italianate; Bishops Court was Italianate; and then the later and present Government House was Italianate-cum-Renaissance. These were powerful models².

However, it was Blackburn's son, James Junior, in partnership with Arthur Newson who called for tenders for building the 'Bibiup's Palace' in December 1849. James Blackburn had been appointed Town Surveyor, but without the right of private practice, in October 1849. He was thus precluded from further involvement in the project. But there is no doubt the design was his and, in all probability he continued through Blackburn and Newson to influence it. However, this partnership lasted only fifteen months and in May 1851 we find the partnership of H D G Russell and H B Thomas calling for new tenders.

In May 1850 the successful tenderer, William Standing, gave notice to the Melbourne City Council of his intention to Lunn' fence construction. It has been widely assumed that the Discovery of Gold in July 1851 brought building operations to a halt. This does not, in fact, seem to have been the case though building work was spasmodic and much more difficult and expensive. Mrs Perry's diary entry for 4 October 1852 describes the trials of building during a gold rush. In-despeution the Bishop had purchased a cart but:

Our cart broke down the first time of using, leaving itself and a load of bricks on the road halfway between this and Pentridge. His Excellency's cart was borrowed, and despatched to bring home the debris: but alas! it too broke down and was left at the same place. Then a dray was hired to bring the unhappy wrecks back; and what do you think they asked for the job? Five Pounds. It resisted strenuously, and they threatened to go to law about it, and I know not what they would not do: however, after a great deal of trouble, he got them to take 31., and they went away grumbling.

By December, Hugh and Emily Childers were negotiating to take over "Upper Jolimont" and, on 11 January 1853, Mrs Perry wrote from Bishops Court to her school friend, Elizabeth Hall, wife of the Rev. William Hall, at Ballan:

We have been removing for the last I don't know how long and scarcely know whether we stand on our head or our feet. You cannot think how earnestly I wish ourselves back in our dear old cottage for this is truly forlorn grandeur- a great unfinished house full of dirty workmen, dust and misery- without doors or windows in the kitchen departments and to crown all, two sick servants.

I am sure if you are troubled by too few servants, we are troubled with too many, for they fall sick and I am obliged to keep others to nurse them so that we are actually 4 women and a girl in this house at the moment, and no slight expense it is I assure you to keep them'.

On 15 December 1853, the Rev'd (later Canon) George Goodman and his wife, Margaret, just arrived from England, visited the Perry's and described the house as follows.

It is a small clustered mansion, with an Italian tower over the entrance; a verandah runs along the front, corresponding to the three west windows of the drawing room, a large bay window

² Miles Lewis, Submission to Heritage Council on Application 4397, 11 May 2000, p.21.

³ Mr.; From Mrs Perry's diary in Richard Perry (ed) Contributions to an Amateur Magazine in Prose and Verse, London 1857.

⁴ Hall Papers, Glenalbyn Grange, Kingower.

constituting its southern look-out. The lawn is like certain grounds familiar to myself in Birmingham. At present, a large portion is given up as a kitchen garden, on which there is growing a plentiful crop of potatoes. The entrance to the grounds is by a gateway of the rudest and most primitive nature. There are several gum trees, one of which is of majestic proportions, whilst a very respectable mulberry forms a nucleus of a pleasing shrubbery. The house is roomy and comfortable -inside, and what is of chief importance in this scorching Christmas weather, is delightfully cool⁵.

The squared Bluestone rubble of Bishops court was probably intended to be stuccoed in due course but this has never been done.

What Blackburn intended for the grounds can only be conjectured but integration of building and landscape was a characteristic of Italianate design. In 1854 Charles Swyer the architect of Christ Church, St Kilda, was engaged to layout the Bishops court grounds. It seems likely that formal planting was used around the house, gradually giving way to the natural landscape beyond.

Following Perry's return to England in 1874, Bishops court served as a temporary Government House for almost two years. This probably explains the purchase, by William Guilfoyle, the recently appointed Director of the Botanic Gardens, of plants from the Bishops court garden in 1875.

Perry's successor, James Moorhouse, arrived in January 1877 and he was followed, in 1887, by Field Flowers Goe. Bishop Goe resigned late in 1901 and left for England early the following year. A Committee of the Council of the Diocese was charged with preparing the house for the reception of a new bishop and reported in October 1902 that-

... large portions of the building were so much out of repair, out of date, and otherwise unsuitable, that it would be better to abandon it altogether, purchase another residence in one of the suburbs of Melbourne, and increase the endowment of the see by erecting rent-producing houses on the old site.

However, this project, though perhaps financially desirable, was viewed with regret by members of the Church and by old colonists of every creed. In deference to this feeling, the Committee reconsidered the whole matter and decided to obtain plans for the thorough renovation of the main portion of the building, 'the removal of all insanitary parts of it, and the construction of some new rooms. Plans were drawn by the Diocesan architect, Walter Butler, and these allowed for the demolition of the semi-detached dining-room, kitchen and outbuildings and the erection of a new wing in Federation Queen Anne Domestic style. This included a new dining-room and kitchen, additional bedrooms and bathrooms and necessitated a remodelling of the main staircase. It speaks volumes for the confidence of Edwardian Melbourne that such an incongruous mixture of architectural styles was accepted.

⁵ Church of England Messenger I October 1903.

⁶ *ibid*, I April 1903.

An Appeal for £3,000 was launched but when it fell short of the sum required, a reduced design, omitting the proposed chapel, was approved and a contract at £2270 was let to Frederick Nixon of South Yarra. The omission of the Chapel was much regretted. On 27 May 1903, Janet, Lady Clarke, convened a meeting for ladies at her residence, Cliveden, East Melbourne, to revive interest. Within five weeks, the Ladies Committee under her presidency had raised a further £900 which enabled the Chapel to be included. The total cost of the work was £3,187 and the new bishop, Henry Lowther Clarke, and his family took up residence on 13 January 1904. William Cain and a few friends provided permanent furniture for the public rooms.

The Chapel was consecrated on St John Baptist's Day, 24 June 1904, (but dedicated under the patronage of St John the Evangelist, recalling the Cambridge College of both Moorhouse and Clarke). The windows, by Clayton and Bell, were given by Bishop Goe in memory of his wife, Emma Rodgers Goe who had died at Bishops court. The marble altar steps and the sanctuary floor were given by Bishop Moorhouse, while Bishop Clarke gave the prayer desk and chair and the altar furnishings, vessels and service books.

In 1975-6, in advance of the retirement of Archbishop Woods, the Council of the Diocese once again debated the future of Bishops court as the episcopal residence. It was finally decided to retain and restore the old house. This took place under the direction of architects, John and Phyllis Murphy during 1977-8. It was funded by the proceeds of a National Trust Appeal and an allocation from the diocesan budget.

In 1998, the Council of the Diocese, yet again, considered the future of Bishops court. A proposal to subdivide portion of the southern frontage to Hotham Street and apply the proceeds of sale to the upkeep of the property was submitted to the Heritage Council but a permit was refused. The Diocese then proceeded to prepare the house for its new Archbishop.

Soon after, the Victorian Branch of the Australian Garden History Society offered its support for the maintenance and restoration of this significant nineteenth Century Australian garden. The work of members at regular working bees and the receipts from Open Days have already wrought wonders.

As I conclude this account of the house and its garden, I think I may safely say that rarely, if ever, in its long 150 year history has Bishops court looked better and been cared for more. I, and the many others who love this place and what it stands for, can only say a warm Thank You to all those responsible. As Archbishop Woods was wont to say, "Jolly good! Well done, you!"

-t-James Grant

3 December 2003