

A Grand Vision: Henry Philip Harris and the History of Burlington Terrace

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PART 1

In September 1866, Henry Philip Harris purchased a large tract of land in the county of Bourke in the parish of North Melbourne at Melbourne East. The land was 'L' shaped, stretching from Albert Street to Lansdowne Street. From its corner location, it

had optimum views of the newly established Fitzroy Gardens and the City of Melbourne. On 13 September, Harris purchased allotments ten and eleven for four hundred and fifty pounds and ten shillings each.

Born in London in 1831, Harris migrated to Australia some time before his marriage to Elizabeth Ackman in 1858.

By 1881, Elizabeth Harris had given birth to eight children: Philip in 1860, Rachel (named after Elizabeth's mother) in 1862, Isabella in 1863, Frederick William in 1865, Ernest Nathaniel in 1872, Ida Catherine in 1874, Evelyn May in 1876 and Vivian Reginald in 1881. Six children survived: Rachel and Ernest Nathaniel died in infancy.

A history of the Harris family is inextricably linked to Burlington Terrace, which became Henry and Elizabeth's home and their livelihood. Yet the nature of Henry's investment also tied Burlington Terrace to Melbourne's influential Jewish community. Indeed, Harris leased

fifteen of the sixteen terrace apartments to prominent Jews such as Reverend A.F. Ornstien, Rabbi Dr. Joseph Abrahams, Philip Blashki and Maurice Brodzky. The history of the Terrace encompasses their lives and myriad others. In the late nineteenth century, Burlington Terrace became a home, and investment and a centre of Jewish community life.

Burlington Terrace was built on what was originally known as Eastern Hill. This part of Melbourne was always recognized as important land, only a short distance from the city centre. Despite its prime location, Crown land sales in East Melbourne were not held until 1852. Unlike Fitzroy, Collingwood and Richmond, (which were offered for sale in 1839), East Melbourne was completely planned before the first release of quarter-acre blocks in 1852

When Henry P. Harris chose allotments ten and eleven upon which to build Burlington Terrace, he knew that his home would be situated in a suburb that attracted Melbourne's business and professional elite, from merchants to politicians to public servants.

Burlington Terrace was built in stages between 1866 and 1871. Like most terrace houses in East Melbourne, it was constructed during a period when the terrace design

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enjoyed immense popularity amongst investors. At this time, most terraces were built from 'sets of identical plans' often 'readily available to the builder.' The utilization of the terrace house for investment purposes rendered architecturally designed buildings both costly and unnecessary.

Yet Burlington Terrace was not just a speculative venture. It was also built as a family residence. It is possible that for this reason, Harris chose to employ Charles Webb to design his

future home. By the early 1860s, Webb had established himself as one of the leading architects of the colony. Born in 1821 to the son of a builder, he was an apprentice to a London architect before following his brother, James,

to Melbourne in 1849. After a brief stint on the Bendigo goldfields, Webb returned to Melbourne to design shops, warehouses, churches and private residences in Melbourne and Brighton. 'He designed Wesley College in 1864, the Alfred Hospital and the Royal Arcade in 1869, the South Melbourne Town Hall and the Melbourne Orphan Asylum in 1878 and the Grand Hotel (now the Windsor) in 1884.' Webb

was also employed to design plans for the enlargement of the Bourke Street synagogue: a building that his brother, James, had completed years earlier. (1)

During this period, Webb also designed Burlington Terrace, which became known as an 'outstanding feature of the Eastern Hill precinct.' The building comprised sixteen terrace houses. 'Designed in the transition classical style, [Burlington Terrace]

heralds the boom classical period with its highly decorative mouldings,' states the National Trust, 'the extensive scale, the complex composition, the unusual timber veranda posts and the delightful balustrade panels are greatly significant features.'(2)

On 3 September 1866, just 10 days before he 'officially' purchased the land, Henry Philip Harris notified the Melbourne City Council of his intent to build 'Burlington Terrace', originally a set of fourteen houses

in Albert and Lansdowne Streets. Harris listed himself as the owner and builder.(3) Building was a painstaking process and continued well into

1867. The Melbourne City Council Rates Book for that year described Burlington Terrace as a series of 'brick houses,' each containing 'eight rooms and a kitchen.'(4) At the time this information was collected, the Harris family had not yet occupied the elegant terrace that was soon to become their new home.

By 1868, Henry Harris moved his wife and family into the Terrace. In that year he was listed in the Sands and McDougall Directory as one of the occupants of Burlington Terrace. During the next twenty years, Henry and Elizabeth Harris and their six children made this corner of Eastern Hill their home. They observed the slow transformation as the Fitzroy Gardens grew and established itself as one of the most popular parks in Melbourne. And they saw the first cable trams travel down Victoria Parade to Richmond.(5)