



The house that

beer built

Zelda Cawthorne visits a house rich in history and steeped in some of Young & Jackson's finest product O. Pictures Rob Baird

FROM the balcony of his home in Jolimont Rd, Thomas Joshua Jackson could see clear across the East Melbourne Cricket Ground to his hotel at the corner of Flinders and Swanton streets.

It was 1883 and at 49 Jackson epitomised Marvellous Melbourne: a tycoon who had struck gold in his youth and was enjoying the fruits of his hard work in a handsome two-storey Italianate terrace house. Eblana he called it, the Latin name for his birthplace, Dublin.

"Thousands of people regularly walk past Jackson's house on their way to or from the MCG, but they have no idea of its historical significance," current owner Peter Fielding says.

"There are so many stories, like the time a train was derailed on the nearby line and Jackson teetled over with a bottle of brandy to comfort victims."

He was, of course, one of the enterprising pair who leased the Princess Bridge Hotel in 1875 and transformed it into our most famous pub, Young & Jackson.

Behind their partnership was a family story to emmesh it has taken Fielding years to untangle it.

"Jackson and Henry Figsby Young were first cousins. Their mothers were sisters," he says. "They were teenagers when they arrived from Ireland. Jackson was 19 when he sailed on the Gem in 1853."

"It 1861 they headed for the Otago goldfields in New Zealand. I imagine that's where they first made their money."

"Young and Jackson were among early Melbourne's movers and shakers. It was a time when the city was out by a clutch of powerful families, and there's certainly prominent."



• A train was derailed on the nearby line and Jackson rushed over with a bottle of brandy to comfort victims

Today, the cricket ground is occupied by luxury townhouses and Eblana serves as the base for Fielding's travel agency. Yet, apart from its modernised areas such as the kitchen and bathrooms, "Jackson would feel at home."

"When I bought the house in 1997, it was a mess," Fielding says. "It had been leased out as office space and was like a rabbit warren, full of partitions."

Original features such as leadlight windows, tiled floors and the superb vaulted timber ceiling of Jackson's billiards room had survived decades of neglect. But fireplaces had disappeared, the courtyard garden was a disaster area, and gloom pervaded the lofty rooms.

Extensive restoration and refurbishment followed.

"We had no interior decorator," Fielding says. "My wife Nancy and I did it all."

The result is a beautifully restored Victorian-era gem in which antiques, reproduction pieces and classic elegance blend effortlessly.

Visitors find themselves transported to the gracefulness and tranquillity of a bygone age. There is also nostalgia of a different sort. Prominently displayed are football tributes and memorabilia, appropriate for an Aussie rules devotee whose clientele is headed by the AFL.

"We're probably one of the last independent travel agencies in Australia," Fielding says. "We have only corporate clients and my whole philosophy is about servicing their specialised needs."

The life and times of Thomas Jackson has become Fielding's other passion.

"It took me a while to discover his grave, but eventually I found it at Kew Cemetery," he says.

"His wife, born Sarah Connell in Dublin, and James Cavanagh, her son from her first marriage, are buried alongside him. Thomas and Sarah had no children together. Probably just as well. They were first cousins too. There was a lot of inter-marriage in that family."

S FIELDING discovered, James' widow, Ellen, didn't venture far when she remarried in 1915 - this time, to Sarah's nephew, John Connell, who was also a publican. He and Ellen were middle-aged, so again there were no children.

After Sarah's death in 1924 - Thomas Jackson had died in 1901 - Ellen inherited Eblana and the following year sold it to the Commonwealth of Australia.

"The house was used as headquarters for the Postmaster-General and various other names followed," Fielding says.

The National Gallery of Victoria could have filled him in on John and Ellen Connell, who contributed handsomely to the gallery the year before they married.

"Ellen didn't want any reminders of Joint's first wife, Emily, to that's how we got the Connell Collection - a fabulous array of antique furniture, paintings, prints, ceramics, silver and glassware," senior curator Terence Lane says.

Back at Eblana, Peter Fielding says: "The atmosphere changes completely at night. I hesitate to use the word ghost, but at times you're powerfully aware you're not alone. It's more than a feeling. It's a presence."

• Transformed: Peter Fielding and the house once owned by Thomas Jackson, who ran Young & Jackson, Melbourne's most famous pub.

■ In the family: an 1890 photo of Ellen Cavanagh, who inherited the house in 1901.

• Labour of love: Peter Fielding is proud of the extensive refurbishment done by him and his wife, Nancy.

