

Brunswick Street Found

Miles Lewis

Introduction

The papers which follow represent a new level of detailed study in the history of Fitzroy, and this has come about partly because of the enthusiasm of the individual authors, and partly because of the uncovering of new sources of information, and the development of new means of searching them. But the average reader, not fully immersed on this topic, will need some context in which to understand both the history of the area and the development of historical studies dealing with it.

History of South Fitzroy

The history of South Fitzroy need be reviewed only briefly here. The first suburban land sold in Melbourne, adjoining the town reserve, was that north of Victoria Street and east of Punt Road. And the first of that land was in what later became Fitzroy and Collingwood, from Nicholson Street eastwards. This land was sold in Sydney on 13 February 1839, in lots of between 12 and 28 acres [five to eleven hectares]. Twelve of the lots covered what is now south Fitzroy, and they were bought largely by Sydney merchants, five of them by the one firm of J T Hughes and John Hosking of Albion Wharf, Sydney.

Only three roads on the periphery, Nicholson Street, Victoria Parade and Smith Street, together with one transverse road, Johnston Street, were reserved by the government. All the other streets of Fitzroy were to be created later by the process of private subdivision. Consequently the names of all the other streets were also privately determined, and this issue is here examined by Meg Lee in relation to the two main intersecting thoroughfares, Brunswick and Gertrude Streets. What is really remarkable in this story is the fact that the names were given to these major streets by a man who only owned five percent of the land in the suburb for about three weeks

Other consequences of this first sale are still very much with us today. The street pattern itself is that determined by the subdividers in the first few years, subject only to some tidying up under the *Fitzroy Ward Improvement Act*, 1854. The process of subdivision and resubdivision, the beginnings of which are here examined by Mike Moore, has created generally smaller allotments than those of suburbs like Carlton, which were laid out by government at a residential scale (even though they too have been subject to further subdivision).

It is remarkable that a suburb which was sold to rich people in large blocks at £7 or £8 per acre was ultimately to be developed into quite small allotments for which poorer people paid many times that amount. The simple truth is that the system was loaded against the small man. This small man, looking for a cottage allotment, could not travel to Sydney for the first sale, and even had he got there he could not have afforded to buy a block of five hectares or more.

And when he finally acquired his tiny allotment from a fifth or sixth generation subdivider at an inflated price, he could not in the early years borrow the money to build upon it. Banks did not lend to cottagers, and nor did most lawyers invest their clients' funds in this way. It was only with the establishment of building and land societies after 1847 that a worker could hope to buy or build a cottage without paying a huge premium directly or indirectly to multiple intervening layers of banks, merchants, speculators, remittance men, retired military officers and local entrepreneurs.

The modern reader will need some explanation of this change, which was so important in the development of the inner suburbs. The Melbourne Benefit Building Society and Saving Fund of 1847, and its immediate successors, were terminating societies like private savings clubs. Each member paid in a fixed sum per week, and when there was enough money to build a house, lots were drawn and the money was advanced to the winner. When the last house had been financed the society was wound up. Those who were advanced money paid interest on it, to the benefit of those who were still waiting. Often, when the society was wound up, another would

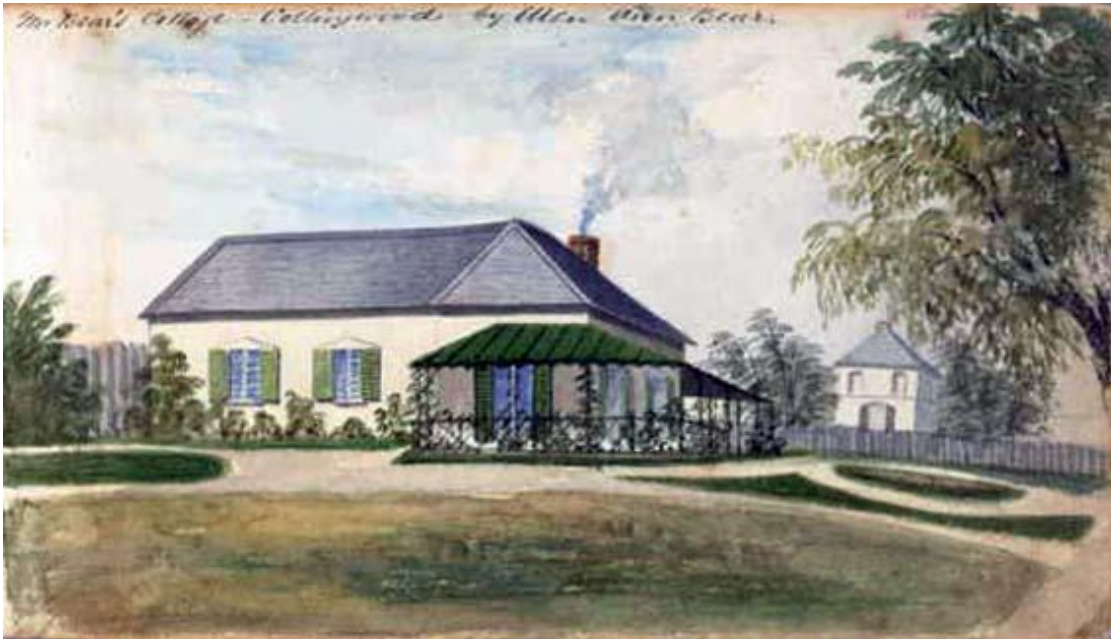
step into its shoes, with the same office and secretariat, so that you might have the Second Atlas Building Society, Third Atlas Building Society, and so on. Depending upon the interest rate, these societies could be an attractive investment even for those who did not wish to build a house, because investors could place their money safely within an established regulatory structure. This would also mean more money would become available more quickly for more and smaller borrowers. New legislation facilitated this by providing for permanent building societies. A permanent society would accumulate funds both from those who were saving to build and from investors. It would advance the money to an owner-builder on the security of the property, and it would not wind up at any predetermined stage.

The difficulties of the small man trying to acquire property in the country were similar. We learn from Trudie Fraser's paper that constant requests were being made to Sir George Gipps by small land purchasers, but to no effect. These would not have been urban labourers but potential small farmers, the yeoman stock of the future colony of Victoria, and their aspirations were not to be met until the passage of the land selection acts in the 1850s. In fact very little land was sold in the country in the 1840s. The large squatting runs we hear about here were held under licence, and then under lease, but only so long as the land was not required for other purposes. Hanmer Bunbury's comment that it was a bad country for persons without money was spot on. Those with cash, as he said elsewhere, could name their own price.

The protagonists in the papers presented here were mostly those who stood to benefit from the situation - those with capital and/or official connections, and who perhaps even used their positions to unjustly enrich themselves, as was alleged of R S Webb. We learn that G B Smyth brought (or was believed to have brought) a fortune with him to Australia, and that this was augmented by the 'remission' or payout upon his retirement from the army. We learn that Bunbury also brought capital, and had a similar payout from the navy. In fact the surprising prominence of retired officers in the inner suburbs is explained here - perhaps for the first time - by this remission system. We learn from Meg Lee that the Colonial Secretary specifically advised retired and half pay officers of the British Navy and Army to invest their remission money in land.

It seemed that these people could hardly fail to make or multiply their fortunes: but in the event they did fail, and disastrously so. We hear that Hanmer Bunbury expressed horror at the amount of speculation in land, and was advised by La Trobe to 'keep quiet, look around you, don't be in a hurry, but keep your money in your pocket'. But that didn't stop him buying a squatting run at enormous expense, initially in association with his brother-in-law, Robert Sconce. Even Sarah Bunbury, a somewhat more level-headed person, thought that her husband and brother were being 'extremely cautious' in their business dealings.

However Robert was smart enough to quickly get out of the squatting run and invest in town allotments and buildings, leaving Hanmer and Sarah to be crushed by the full force of the pastoral recession, which ensued almost immediately. George Smyth speculated even more extensively than Bunbury, returned to England a broken man, and died at the age of thirty. All these risk-takers make a striking contrast with Anthony Beale, who arrived with far less capital and with more modest aspirations of making a living from the sale of milk, eggs and poultry. Beale survived the recession and in due course moved from Newtown to a life of modest prosperity at Greensborough.



'Mr. Bear's Cottage - Collingwood by Ellen Ann Bear', pasted into the Henry Godfrey sketchbook c 1841-5. State Library of Victoria H90.53/1/115.

In the papers that follow we learn much more than was previously known about the houses and the living conditions of the more middle class residents of the 1840s, down even to their milk bills. 'Garryowen' [Edmund Finn] reported the existence in 1841 of only half a dozen 'tidyish cottages' along Brunswick Street between what is now Victoria Parade and Palmer Street,¹ which is not surprising given the youth of the suburb, but many more were built in the next year or two, before the economic recession froze most development. Mike Moore has drawn my attention to Ellen Bear's watercolour of 'Mr Bear's Cottage Collingwood', which has escaped general notice because it is pasted into somebody else's sketchbook (that of Henry Godfrey, referred to in Moore's paper). Further research would be needed to confirm it, but the reasonable supposition would be that this stood on the site at the corner of Victoria Parade and Regent Street where John Pinney Bear was later to build one of the first terraces of houses in Fitzroy.

Whether Bear's terrace required the immediate demolition of the cottage, or whether that occurred later, it illustrates another important point. None of these early bourgeois dwellings survives today, and in fact most, if not all, were demolished within a decade or two. This general destruction is explained mainly by the population pressure of immigration during the gold rush, and the operation of the *Melbourne Building Act*, which diverted development away from the centre of Melbourne. This is why so little is known about the houses which comprised the prime residential suburb of Melbourne in the 1840s (though there were many villas in other suburbs, they were distant and scattered). Today the oldest known building in Fitzroy is not a house, but the former Devonshire Arms hotel.

Historiography of South Fitzroy

There has never been a time when the history of south Fitzroy was totally ignored. 'Garryowen', already referred to above, was himself an early resident, and his later *Chronicles* make a number of references to the Newtown of his time. In the twentieth century J K Moir took photographs of important and interesting buildings, such as the former studio of Louis Buvelot, and today these are mostly held in the State Library. Subsequently the late John O'Brien, a historian at Melbourne University and a notable pioneer of local history, took the numerous photographs which are such a valuable resource today. At a less extensive scale so did others,

¹ Jacobs Lewis Vines & Miles Lewis, *South Fitzroy Conservation Study* (Jacobs Lewis Vines, Fitzroy [Victoria] 1979), p 9.

such as Dawn Lumley. By this time the impetus for such recording was the menace of the Housing Commission in its role as a slum clearance authority.



'The Old School in 1842': T G Atkinson, *Brunswick Street Wesleyan Sabbath School Fitzroy. Jubilee Records* ([Brunswick Street Wesleyan Sabbath School] Melbourne 1893), frontispiece.

But there was only one published monograph, and that was a modest jubilee history of the Wesleyan Methodist Sunday School, most notable for the inclusion of a purportedly early view of the site, which today must be regarded with considerable suspicion. From the 1950s architecture students at Melbourne University were required to undertake a fourth year history 'thesis', and a number of these deal with Fitzroy topics. Given that the students were almost totally unqualified for the task it is surprising that some of these reports are in fact quite useful. At the very least they record conditions at that time, and those which deal with hotels, and were therefore able to draw upon the R K Cole Collection at the State Library, may contain valuable data. Finally, although it had a limited coverage of South Fitzroy in particular, Bernard Barrett's *The Inner Suburbs* of 1971² was of seminal importance in establishing an approach to the study of these areas, and particularly in drawing attention to the process of private subdivision which is so much a theme of the present papers.

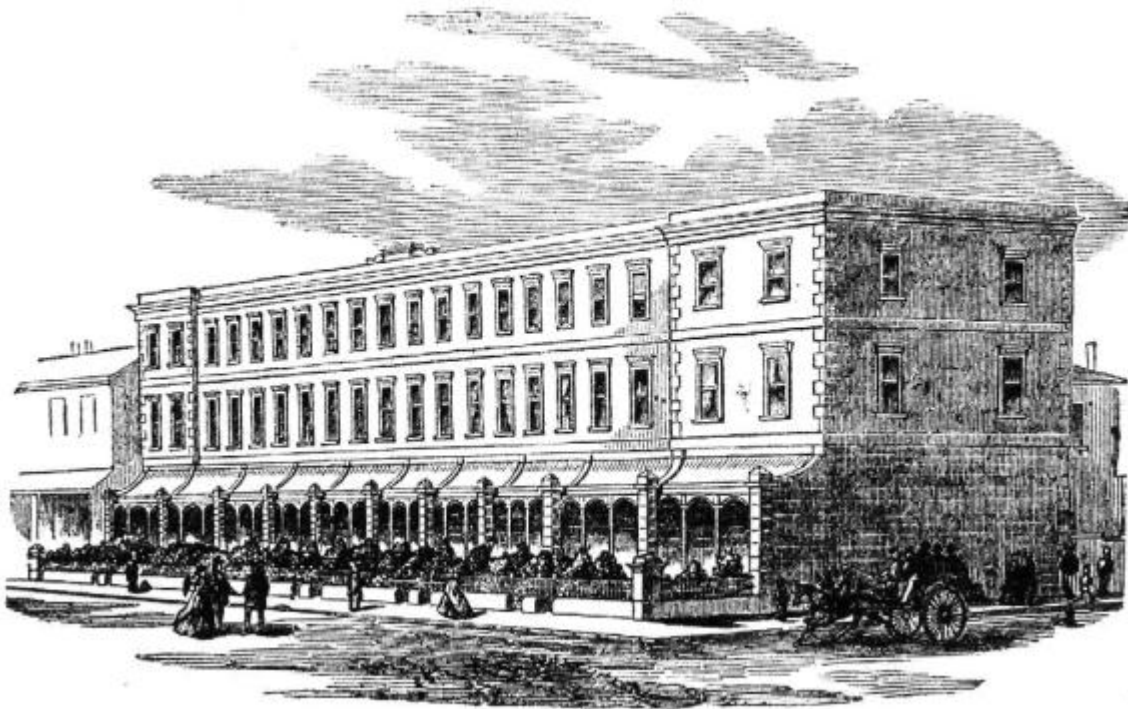
The decline of the Housing Commission and the rise of the conservation movement is exemplified by the *South Fitzroy Conservation Study* of 1979, commissioned jointly by the Fitzroy City Council and the Historic Buildings Preservation Council. It was undertaken by Jacobs Lewis Vines Architects, a partnership of three youngish architects who had studied under George Tibbits and myself (Wendy Jacobs, Nigel Lewis and Liz Vines), and they engaged me as a historical consultant. There was now a new resource available, my *Australian Architectural Index*. It was still in its early stages, and was on filing cards (it was later microfiched, and today is on line), but made it possible to attribute dates, architects &c to a number of previously enigmatic structures. We also realised that a building which did not conform to the *Melbourne Building Act*, for example by having timber elements projecting over the street frontage, would have to have been built before the Act applied. That was how we identified the Devonshire Arms hotel, the earliest known building surviving in Fitzroy, licensed in about 1843. It had suffered many alterations, but close investigation only confirmed our

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Bernard Barrett, *The Inner Suburbs* (Melbourne UP, Carlton [Victoria] 1971).

suspensions. For example a split paling roof, totally unacceptable under the Act, survived beneath the later corrugated iron.

Many theses and individual building studies were to follow, but the next landmark was the publication by the Fitzroy History Society in 1989 of a very substantial work, *Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb*, funded by the Cutten History Trust.³ This was the work of about thirty-five authors, many of whom have since risen to almost legendary status, and it necessarily remains the definitive work on the suburb. The story might well have ended there, but it has not. The Fitzroy History Society has changed, and so have its historians. The authors of the present papers (apart from the present writer, a token gesture to the past) are a new generation. They have access to search engines such as Trove, to the digital version of the Burchett index of Melbourne building permits (which applies to Fitzroy), and to new manuscript materials such as the Bunbury papers, which have reached the State Library in the past two decades. And while it might be thought that only matters of trivial detail remain to be investigated, that is far from being the case. The present papers focus on the decade of the 1840s, a period which was barely touched upon in *Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb*, and which proves to be significant in many ways.



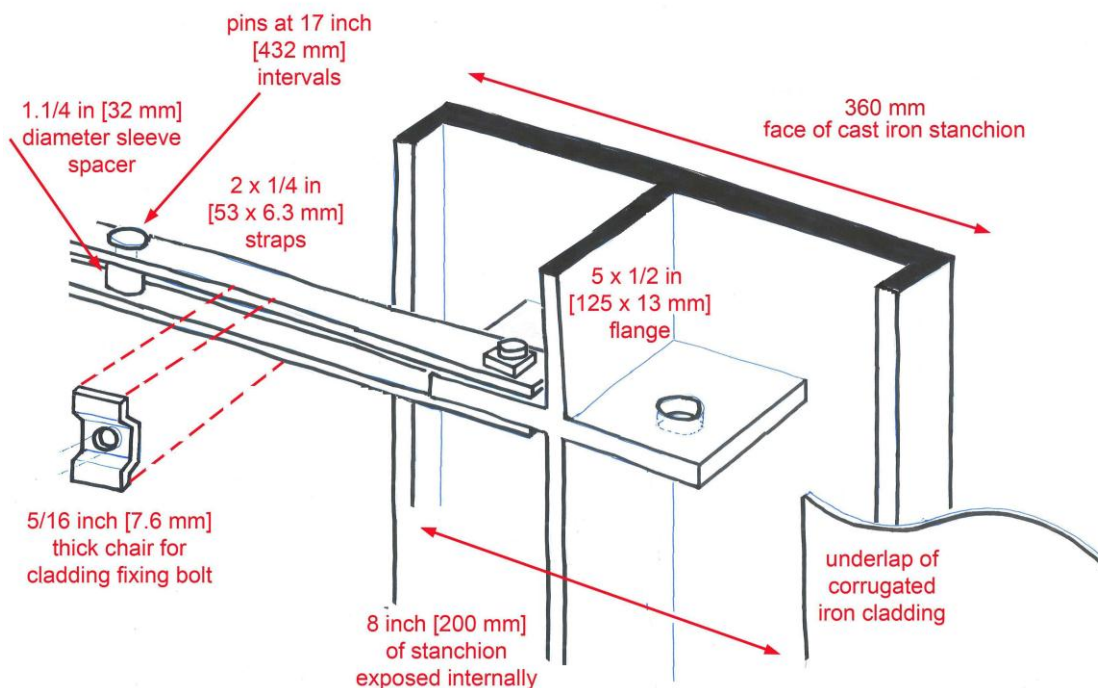
Royal Terrace, Nicholson Street. Fitzroy: wood engraving by John Gill (almost certainly the designer of the building), *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 26 July 1862.

It remains for me to update my own limited role in this story. In 1979 I suggested John Gill as the architect of Royal Terrace, Nicholson Street, on the grounds that he was known to have been active in South Fitzroy and that he was the only architect in Melbourne specifically known to have used smooth dressed bluestone (at Scott's Hotel, Collins St). I never had any occasion to investigate the building further, but I watched with increasing embarrassment as others gradually turned this attribution into fact. Only recently did I learn, to my great relief, of the illustration of the terrace by Gill which was published in the *Illustrated Melbourne Post* in 1862. There can no longer be any real doubt that he was the architect of the building.

³ Tony Birch et al, *Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb* (Hyland House Melbourne 1989).



Building in King William Street, Fitzroy, believed to have been a store or warehouse of about 1853, later All Saints Parish Hall: view and detail, of the brand 'EDWIN MAW LIVERPOOL'. Miles Lewis



Edwin Maw's construction system, presumably as used in All Saints Parish Hall, King William Street. Based principally upon a building at Longford House, Longford, Tasmania. Miles Lewis.

We also, in the 1979 report, identified the Town Hall precinct, B7, which included structures like the Napier Hotel and All Saints Catholic Church and Hall.⁴ The hall had been classified only at 'C' level by the National Trust, but it had cast iron stanchions bearing the brand of Edwin Maw, Liverpool, and I knew it to be one of those prefabricated buildings which were so important in Victoria's history. Nevertheless it was impossible to investigate. The facade had been rebuilt in masonry and the interior completely lined, so only the original side flank could be seen. Since that time I have come to know of a number of Edwin Maw buildings in New South Wales and Tasmania, and understand the extraordinary system of construction which presumably survives within the Fitzroy structure. It is as if an iron frame was built and then giant bicycle chains run horizontally through the walls, and used to attach the corrugated iron cladding.

⁴ Jacobs Lewis Vines & Miles Lewis, *South Fitzroy Conservation Study* (Jacobs Lewis Vines, Fitzroy [Victoria] 1979), pp 9, 92.



Royal Terrace, 39-49 Brunswick Street, by Charles Laing, 1856-8; photograph by Davies & Co, c 1860, State Library of Victoria. Modern photograph: Miles Lewis.



Royal Terrace, 39-49 Brunswick Street, early grates in no 39: Miles Lewis.

Royal Terrace at 39-49 Brunswick Street (the *other* Royal Terrace) has also revealed more of its secrets. The terrace was built by Dr William Crook, to the design of Charles Laing, in 1856-8. The terrace was two-storeyed but for the end houses, which were of three storeys. Of these the northern one at the corner of Gertrude Street was Dr Crook's house and surgery. It differed from the others, which had single storey verandahs, in that the ground floor projected to the street frontage, and had a level above it like a glassed-in balcony. This had all the appearance of an addition, but it can be seen in a photograph dating from about 1860, shortly after the terrace was built.



Royal Terrace; original or early signwriting exposed on the Gertrude Street flank. Miles Lewis.

In 1882, just after Barcelona Terrace was built next door, Royal Terrace, except for Crook's house, was given new cast iron verandahs and balconies. It was probably at this time, too, that the service wings were extended as far as the rear boundary. All these additions were distinctly defined, and the verandahs and balconies did little to damage the original facade. When two architecture students, Jonathan Duggan and Stephen Clements, did a set of measured drawings, they were easily able to prepare a reconstruction of the original form, and the terrace, even with the 1882 additions, remains a distinguished survivor of the 1850s, ranking only after its namesake in Nicholson Street. In recent years the paint was stripped from the north or Gertrude Street flank, exposing the original signwriting which has been applied direct to the stucco surface. Only a small portion remains visible today, but the complete suite of signs was interesting evidence of the scope of Crook's medical practice, which included vaccination, the filling and extraction of teeth, and the treatment of animals.

Conclusion

Although the present papers concentrate upon the 1840s, Catherine Pugsley takes us to 1886 in her consideration of the Veterinary College, and this is appropriate enough. South Fitzroy was

on the rise until the 1890s. The development of terrace housing which began as a boom in 1851 continued at a modest pace until the 1880s, when the exhibitions of 1880 and 1888-9, in the nearby Carlton Gardens, stimulated not only more terrace building, but the refacing and upgrading of existing rows like Royal Terrace, Brunswick Street, and lodging houses like Osborne House in Nicholson Street. All this ceased with the depression of the 1890s, and that explains the twentieth century historical developments to which we will return.



'Panoramic View of Fitzroy Melbourne' by F W Niven 1889 (doubtless taken from St Patrick's Cathedral), State Library of Victoria H4634. Digitally manipulated detail showing Brunswick Street looking north from Victoria Parade. Morrison Place is in the foreground and Victoria Parade crosswise, with the three storey Belvidere Hotel on the north-west corner of the junction and the cable tram engine house on the north-east. On the east side of Brunswick Street can be seen the E.B.C, shoe factory building (now incorporated into Cathedral Hall) and the spire of the Wesleyan church, now demolished.

Miles Lewis is an architectural historian, who has lived in South Fitzroy for thirty-six years.