Social Justice History Walk

Anti-Poverty Week 2014

Rev Frank Coaldrake, Selwyn Reynolds, and Father Tucker survey the surrounding slum areas of Fitzroy from the roof of Brotherhood headquarters.

Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a community-based organisation concerned with social justice. We work for a better deal for disadvantaged people and provide important services for people who need them most.

Founded on 8 December 1930 by Father Gerard Kennedy Tucker, the Brotherhood moved from New South Wales to St Mary's Mission in Fitzroy St, Fitzroy in 1933 to help the poor in that area.

The Great Depression saw the Brotherhood's work in social welfare and unemployment significantly expand.

Nowadays, the Brotherhood's vision is an Australia free of poverty. The organisation has developed a wide range of services and programs that cover areas such as children and family services, aged care, assistance for job-seekers and support for refugees. We also undertake research and policy development work and continue to promote social change for a fairer, more inclusive society.

Details: www.bsl.org.au

Jessica Millott, manager of the Coolibah Centre, was lauded in the 1976 book Sheilas: A tribute to Australian women (John Larkins & Bruce Howard) in the chapter A gentle protector of the old and week of Fitzroy. Some of her charges are simply poor pensioner folk who have maintained their dignity despite the odds; others lapse into Dead Man's Lane (directly behind the Brotherhood). Sometimes she walks there to make sure none has died or, if they are alive and drinking, to take away their money so there will be no pickings for the human vultures who crouch in the doorways.

"Jessica Millott is a protector of the old and week of Fitzroy.

Photo by Bruce Howard, 1975
National Library of Australia
nla.pic-vn4227583-v

Social Justice History Walk

This 90-minute walk guides you through some of the sites where the first attempts at social justice took place in the poorest parts of Fitzroy and in Melbourne.

Father Gerard Tucker transferred the Brotherhood of St Laurence to St Mary's Mission in Fitzroy St, Fitzroy in 1933. The Brothers lived at the rear of the Mission House. From the garden, Fr Tucker could see the buildings in Brunswick St which he would later acquire for the Brotherhood. He wanted the buildings - two two-storey shops with dwellings, a wood yard, and a two-storey shop and dwelling in poor condition - to expand his work in the slums and to gain access to Brunswick St, the main Fitzroy thoroughfare.

After many appeals for donations, he successfully purchased the shops in 1936 for 3000 pounds.

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For more information on the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the work we do, please visit:

www.bsl.org.au

Photo by Maggie Diaz

Further reading:

Laurie O'Brien, 'A Much-Charitied Acre', Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb, Fitzroy History Society MUP 1989

B Stagoll, P Spencer, Social Justice Walk around Fitzroy and North Fitzroy 1999 and 2002,
http://www.fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au/selfdirectedwalking.php

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Social Justice History Walk

The Fitzroy History Society comprises a group of people interested in Fitzroy's history. Monthly committee meetings, activities such as local walks, films, lectures, visits, tours and social events are held throughout the year. The society does not collect or acquire historical material, or own its own premises. With close links to City of Yarra Councillors, the society is active in matters regarding the built environment and in the preservation and protection of the historical aspects of Fitzroy.

Membership is $10 per annum. Details: fitzroyhistorysociety@yahoo.com.au

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1. THE COOLIBAH CENTRE

Established in 1946, the Coolibah Club was the first senior citizen's centre in Australia. Father Tucker named it after the Coolibah tree in the song Waltzing Matilda. It was extended in 1980. Nowadays, the centre offers a community-based program that provides activities, knowledge and skills for socially and financially disadvantaged older adults and people with disabilities.

2. MILLOTT HOUSE

Father Tucker moved the Brotherhood to St Mary's Mission in Fitzroy from NSW in 1933 to help the poor in that neighbourhood. Young men who wished to serve others in the name of Christ came together as a community at St Mary's. They lived simply, studied, prayed and helped with social welfare activities. In 1984, St Mary's Mission House was converted into a rooming house for 22 people and renamed Millott House.

3. DEAD MAN'S LANE

The lane beside Millott House was given to the Brotherhood by the City of Fitzroy in exchange for the pocket of open space in Fitzroy Street. The many bluestone blocks used in the Brotherhood gardens come from this lane.

The lane opposite was the scene of many evils in early Fitzroy history. Dead Man's Lane, Marion St and Hanover St were populated by sly grog shops and brothels in the early 20th century. Many underworld shootouts happened here. Jessica Millott, the manager of the Coolibah Centre and long time Brotherhood volunteer said she checked every day to see if "one of her men" was lying drunk or dead in Dead Man's Lane.
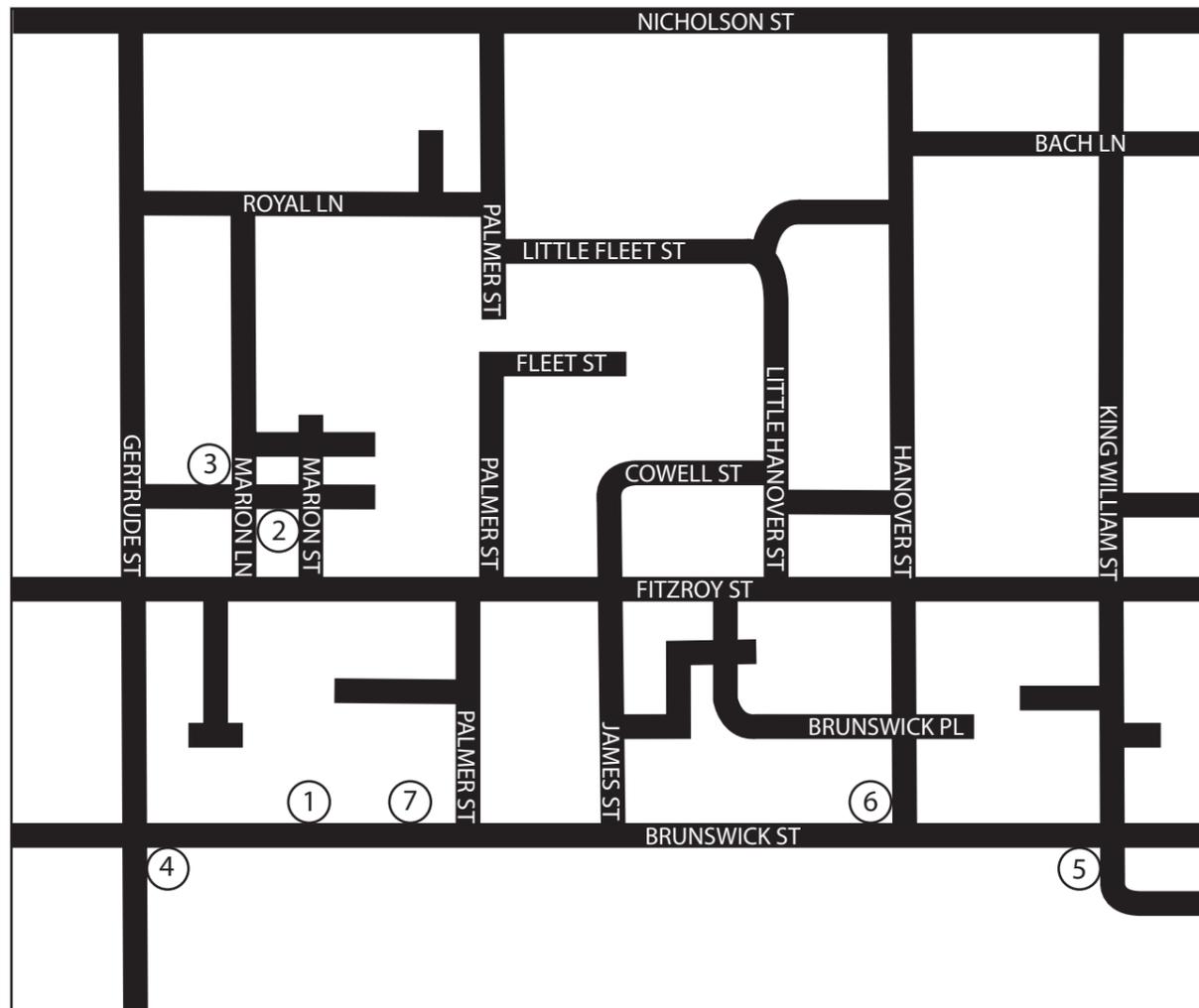
4. ATHERTON GARDENS ESTATE

The Atherton Gardens high-rise estate was built between the mid 1960s-1971, and replaced an entire neighbourhood made up of over 250 buildings, spread across eight streets. This neighbourhood was located between Brunswick, Gertrude, Napier, King William and Condell streets. About 180 homes lined the streets, most inhabited since the 19th century. The locals were mainly struggling families, including European migrants and Aboriginal people. About 50 shops were clustered along Brunswick, Gertrude, Webb and Condell streets. A Methodist church provided a place of worship, and a range of industries were squeezed in besides houses and businesses. Local community resistance to further clearances in the 1970s brought an end to the high-rise program.

Brotherhood store in Brunswick St, Fitzroy, 1970s

Homeless men queuing for food in inner Melbourne, 1960s

Atherton Gardens high-rise with children's playground, 1970s

The slums of Fitzroy, 1930s

5. CONNIE BENN CENTRE

The Connie Benn Centre is named for Connie Benn (1926 – 2011), one of Victoria's most significant social innovators and policy reformers. Her work at the Brotherhood's Family Centre changed community development and welfare models of social work across the country and became part of an important Australian anti-poverty experiment which showed that given the right resources, supports and opportunities, there is a capacity in everyone to build a good life.

In 1971, the Brotherhood undertook a radical new approach to working with families on low incomes. The old Mission House of the Mission to Streets and Lanes behind the Brotherhood's head office was purchased. In January 2013, a new family and children's community hub opened at 160 Brunswick St and the City of Yarra assumed sole responsibility for the management of the new Connie Benn Centre.

In 1944 the Brotherhood's first social action campaign was the 'Battle of King Willam St' against unfair landlord and tenant regulations.

6. HANOVER CENTRE

Hanover Welfare Services was founded in 1964 as one of the first specialist homeless support agencies in Melbourne. Initially its primary focus was support for homeless men in the inner city, many of who were photographed by one of Hanover's founders, social researcher Alan Jordan. In 2004, Hanover's then chief executive, Tony Nicholson, left to lead the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

7. NORTH YARRA COMMUNITY HEALTH

After a seven-year community campaign to redirect Commonwealth Government funding away from hospitals to community control, the Fitzroy Community Health Association was formed in 1983. A new building was opened in 1987 at 75 Brunswick St, in conjunction with the Brotherhood, at the old cottage where Community Aid Abroad had been established in 1962.

Later amalgamations with Carlton Community Health Centre in 1993 created the North Yarra Community Health, a major provider of social and health services in our community.