

MIDDLE PARK HISTORY GROUP

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Photograph: Rose Stereograph Co. State Library of Victoria

Decoration in Middle Park Architecture: Cast Iron lace.

Max Nankervis

It was Dr E. Graeme Robinson who first alerted us to the unique form of cast iron in Melbourne architecture in 1960 when he published "Victorian Heritage". His seminal work was based on years of investigation and photographing of cast iron around the world. But he found its use in Melbourne had some unique qualities.

Cast iron has long been used in various forms, but its use became more popular after the Industrial Revolution made repetition patterns more possible. In brief, the process involves pouring a mixture of iron and carbon into a mould of fine sand made from an imprint of a carved wooden shape. Unlike wrought-iron, it is not amenable to welding and generally requires bolts to link various sections together.

Because it became easier to produce, its use as architectural decoration broadened, and cantilevered cast iron balconies or small verandas were often a feature of English Georgian Houses in towns like Bath and Bristol. And as early colonists attempted to recreate "home" this form of cast iron decoration thus became a feature in some early houses in Sydney, and only occasionally in Melbourne where few houses built before the mid 1850s survive.

But as the frantic whirl of building post-gold rush produced ever more extravagant architecture in Melbourne, simple veranda railings and posts evolved to produce a fashion of exuberant and elaborate designs which became a hallmark of Melbourne's Victorian architecture from about 1860 to the 1890s after which a severe depression curtailed extravagance, and the newly emerging architectural fashion in England of the *Arts and Crafts Movement* led to a shift in taste towards simpler decoration.



Early Australian use of cast iron

Because most development in Middle Park took place after the 1890s, the use of cast iron in decoration is limited, and the new fashion of wood fenestration predominated. But like any fashion, be it clothes or architecture, there were those who stuck to the old fashions, and so some houses built well after the crash of the 1890s display cast iron in some form.



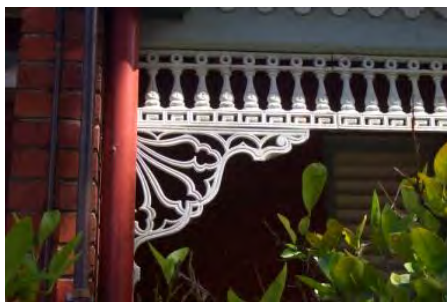
Corinthian "capital"

The most common architectural use of cast iron is found on verandas where a bull-nosed or convex galvanised veranda is supported on fluted cast iron posts about 40–50 cm in diameter. These columns typically mimicked classical architecture by having a pedestal base and, most commonly a form of “Corinthian” (acanthus leaf) capital (or top) section, but with a short extension against which was fitted a “lace” valence strung between the columns. Again, typically, the valence had at each end as it met the column, a small lace “bracket” (picture on this page). In more elaborate and larger verandas these columns were sometimes given more “weight” by being set in pairs. But as most houses in Middle Park are small – either “single-fronted” - about 5–6 m wide, or double fronted at twice that width, verandas were still relatively small. Moreover, as the facade was often asymmetrical, the veranda only stretched across half the facade, and was thus quite small.

The early cast iron used in Melbourne was, according to Robertson, imported from England. But as its popularity grew, local manufacturers emerged. Thus, most likely, all cast iron used in Middle Park was locally produced.

But fashion being what it is, what was perhaps an original design for a large house, was copied and reproduced on a smaller scale for the (limited form of) mass production of the majority of houses in Middle Park. To facilitate this, the cast iron producers printed catalogues from which clients could select their own design. However, to protect their assets, these producers often registered their designs, although creating a new design was no real problem. Over time the designs became ever more florid.

In general, cast iron was produced in “modules” such that a particular design could be repeated to accommodate a short or long span whether as a valence or a balustrade. Typically a valence section was between 40–600 cm long and able to be repeated to the desired length, and link with a matching bracket at each end. Balustrades were typically between 40–80 cm, with each section often separated to give a lighter effect.



Valence and bracket

In general, these Victorian era designs reflected the aesthetic spirit of the age, and were generally of florid design incorporating swirls, flowers and leaves, or some other recognisable motive. Apparently in a burst of Empire patriotism, around 1885, the jubilee of Queen Victoria’s ascent to the throne, some designs

introduced a small crown into their design. There are examples of this in some Middle Park lacework.



Patriotism; the crown.

Because the vast majority of houses in Middle Park are single storey (and often single-fronted), the use of iron lacework is restricted to a valence and brackets across the ground level veranda, and only in some cases is the span broken by a cast iron column forming an entrance area, although symmetrical double-fronted houses usually had a central entrance area defined by two columns. In a few Middle Park examples the whole arrangement is broken into two or three equal “panels”. Number 18 Canterbury Road is a good example of this arrangement. Two-storey houses generally had a cast-iron balcony and balustrade at the upper level, with a second level valence across the veranda roof. Perhaps the largest number of examples of this two-storey effect can be found in Canterbury Road, especially at the northern end where the earliest development took place, and within the time-frame of the Victorian era style. Two other notable iron lace terrace rows are each side of Armstrong Street. However, a somewhat unique example of a two-storey veranda can be found in a pair of terraces at 330–332 Richardson St. Here the cast iron balustrade is both across the front, but also returned back to the facade on both sides (and omits the usual two level dividing wall), thus creating completely separate verandas, giving the buildings an unusual “lightness” despite their heavy, elaborate masonry fenestration.

While some builders of rows of terraces continued the same design across all facades – typically 2–4 houses – they used the same design on all houses, though some varied the design for each house, and had a repetition of, say; design A, design B, design A, etc. Others appear to have used a different design on each house, thus giving a terrace a degree of “individuality”. Though just because a terrace row has a variety of cast iron valence styles today, does not automatically indicate an attempt at individuality on the part of the builder. Rather it may be that on some houses the cast iron has been removed in an attempt to “modernise” the house (particularly around the 1950s when such decoration was often seen as “old fashioned”). Then, at a later date, particularly in the 1980s when “oldness” became a fashionable quality, the iron lace was replaced, generally with a cast alloy (not iron) reproduction.



Cast iron encased in wood

But as the architectural fashion shifted from the elaborate and extravagant decoration of the Victorian era, towards the more restrained and “wood-based” decoration of the late Victorian, then Edwardian era around 1900, some houses displayed a sort of “transitional” use of cast iron. Thus in some houses small panels or modules of cast iron were encased in a wooden frame, thus showing adherence to both the Victorian and Edwardian fashion. However, these panels usually lack the florid form of the earlier period and are more “geometric” in design.

The other key residential use of cast iron was in front fences. In the Victorian era, many – especially larger properties – displayed an elaborate cast iron fence, with heavy lacework, cast iron posts, generally capped with a finial. Strung between these elaborate posts was a fence made of cast iron poles capped with an often spear-shaped cast iron finial, the fence typically sitting on a heavy bluestone plinth. Again, because Middle Park has generally less extravagant houses and was built after the change of style of the 1890s, there are relatively few such fences. But, as with the valences and posts, there are alloy reproduction fences and posts which have been introduced to some houses in Middle Park, even in some cases where they may not have been originally.

But while the significant use, and unique style of cast iron use in Melbourne was primarily in residential use, decorative cast iron was also used on urban infrastructure. It was commonly used for light poles, and street furniture such as park seats. In some cases

[Note: This is the first of a series of articles on decorative embellishments particular to Middle Park, beginning with cast iron. A comprehensive article on Cast Iron Decoration in Melbourne by Alison St John appeared in Newsletters 8 and 10]

NEVER FORGET UNCLE LES by Maree Wilson

Book review by Ed Boyle

Two brothers from Middle Park have left detailed accounts of their experiences as combatants in WWI. *George Leslie Makin*, who signed up in August 1914, was a prolific letter writer, particularly to his mother, up to his death in September 1918. Over 140 of his letters are held at the Australian War Memorial and many others by family members. *James Joseph Makin*, who enlisted in August 1915 and survived, was also a regular letter writer, especially to his younger brother Perce. He also kept a detailed diary up to the battle of Pozieres/Mouquet Farm in mid-1916. Perce’s son, also Perce, has made Jim’s diary and letters available to a MPHG researcher. He also has presented copies of the

elaborate memorials and fountains were created from cast iron. However, Middle Park has few examples of this use, though one example of urban infrastructure can still be seen (in part) at the subway under the light rail track at Middle Park station where the road and pedestrian pathways are separated by an iron fence with cast iron posts. Unfortunately a large section of this fence was destroyed by a vehicle recently and has been replaced by a cyclone-type fence.

Not unlike the verandas on residential buildings, 19th century shops typically had a street-front veranda extending from the facade to the gutter, supported by cast iron posts and displaying a small valence across the top. Unfortunately safety considerations and fashion and a change in technology saw to the demise of most of these verandas. Not only were they particularly prone to poor parking exercise by drivers of cars – thus leading to a catastrophic collapse of the roof, while the “modern” effect of cantilevered verandas, meant most were removed. However, in some cases a reproduction veranda, with the posts set back from the gutter have been restored to a few shops in Middle Park. Armstrong Street shopping area has two extended sets, one on each side of the road.

Another use of cast iron can be found in various ground covers over conduits, etc. This usage continued well after the fashion for residential use declined. Often these covers are cast with the imprint of the body or company whose responsibility they were, and for the older ones, they often betray their age from the florid decoration found as a cartouche on the opening.

But like some many aspect of life, they are driven by fashion, though some would claim that fashion is often driven by exogenous factors, especially economics. Thus the shift from elaborate cast iron to fenestration based on wood can be seen as a reflection of changing tastes in Europe, especially in Britain towards the end of the 19th century. But the more restrained style may also have had an economic driver; the old styles were just too expensive to continue.

booklet *Never Forget Uncle Les* to the MPHG and the Emerald Hill Heritage Centre.



Lieut. George Leslie Makin

The diaries and letters have been edited into a book, book by Maree Wilson, whose grandfather was Les Makin's brother. It is an informative and moving account, drawing on the brothers' correspondence and military records from the National Archives.

Les was the second eldest child of Henry and Marianne Makin of 91 Harold Street. Les had two sisters and three brothers. After secondary school he worked as a clerk with a shipping company and served in the 51st Regiment, Citizen Forces, Albert Park. Soon after the declaration of war in August 1914 Les, aged 20, enlisted in the 5th Battalion, 2nd Brigade, 1st Division. He gained rapid promotion to the rank of lieutenant. The third sibling, Jim, enlisted in August 1915. He was assigned to the 21st Battalion, 6th Brigade, 2nd Division. Eventually he gained the rank of sergeant.

Maree Wilson tells the story of Les in chronological order with occasional references to Jim. She begins with the convoy to Egypt during which the German raider SMS *Emden* was crippled by the HMAS *Sydney*. This is followed by training and sightseeing in Egypt. Les's division took part in the April 1915 landing at Gallipoli. In his letters Les gave graphic descriptions of the costly Battle of Lone Pine in early August. Soon after he was hospitalised on Lemnos suffering from enteric fever. He recuperated in England. He rejoined his battalion in time to take part in the Battle of Pozieres/Mouquet Farm north-east of Amiens on the Western Front in mid-1916.



The village of Pozieres after the battle, August 1916

Jim, in a separate division, had his baptism of fire in this battle when he suffered a severe case of shell-shock and was hospitalised in England, where the brothers finally met up. In early May 1917, Les, now a lieutenant, fought in the Second Battle of Bullecourt, north-east of Pozieres. Later in 1917 he was hospitalised in England suffering from trench fever, a severe bacterial infection. As he recovered he was assigned to training roles, but he was anxious to return to his battalion. In early 1918 the Germans mounted a major offensive towards Amiens. Australians played a key role in halting the German advance and then driving them back towards the Hindenberg Line. In

early August Lieutenant George Makin rejoined his battalion. On 24 August he was struck by a shell when leading his company in an attack at St. Martin's Wood, Bray-sur-Somme.



Bray-sur Somme

He sustained severe injuries to both legs. He battled for his life at the 8th General hospital, Rouen, where his right leg was amputated. On 8 September he lost his battle and died. He is buried at St Sever Cemetery, Rouen, France.

Australian troops were sometimes called "six bob a day tourists", which was probably coined early in Egypt. Of course, promotion meant higher pay. Les and Jim were strapping young men. Les was just over six feet tall, well above average height for the time, and Jim was a few inches taller. In an early letter Les described climbing to the top of the Great Pyramid of Khufu where he and his mates carved their names. As he recovered in England from his two bouts of illness, he attended the theatre regularly and was several times a guest on country estates. He also wrote about playing Australian Rules Football in some inter-unit matches. Brother Jim was selected to play in the AIF's rugby grudge match against the Welsh Guards, which the AIF won.

Jim had been posted to administrative duties in England as he recovered from shell-shock and the Armistice was signed before he was passed fit to return to the battle front. Like the rest of his close-knit family, Jim was shattered by the death of his brother. Les had survived the carnage of Lone Pine, Pozieres/Mouquet Farm and Bullecourt only to be mortally wounded as the war drew to a close. Jim returned to Australia in January 1919. Not quite in his mid twenties he went on to play 30 games with South Melbourne and 16 with Melbourne in the VFL. According to his nephew, Perce Makin, he later left Australia, eventually establishing a concreting business in Hawaii.

Maree Wilson provides a thoroughly researched historical framework to place the continuous references to Les's letters in context. Strict censorship prevented soldiers giving certain details in their letters home, such as shortcomings of commanders and high casualty rates. In a sense she skillfully lets Les, through his correspondence, tell his own story. Readers, especially those with a connection to Middle Park, will surely never forget the story of Lieutenant George Leslie Makin.

TREES IN MIDDLE PARK

New Zealand Christmas Tree

This is the fifth of a series of articles by Lynsey Poore on the trees growing in Middle Park. The series concentrates on the plants used in public places, mostly along our streets and examines their origin and history.

New Zealand Christmas trees grace many Middle Park Streets, notably in Wright Street.

The New Zealand Christmas Tree, or to give it its Maori name Pohutukawa, is one of the New Zealand's iron-hearted trees. The generic name *Metrosideros* reflects the nature of the timber as *Metra* means core or heartwood and *sideros* refers to iron or the hardness of the heartwood. The specific name *excelsa* means tall, highest or sublime.

Mature trees showing aerial fibrous roots

The Pohutukawa is a coastal evergreen tree and belongs to the Myrtle family Myrtaceae. Its native range is the coastal regions of the North Island of New Zealand but also occurs on the shores of lakes in the Rotorua area. There are 12 species of *Metrosideros* endemic to New Zealand and the Rata is another example. It is spectacular in full flower as apparently the redness of the blossom incites passion not only in people but in birds.

The tree is multi-trunked to 25 m tall with a spreading dome and the trunk is sometimes festooned with matted fibrous roots. The leaves are oblong and leathery while the underside is coated with white hairs which offer protection from salt-laden winds.

Flowering is from November to December and the flowers are brilliant crimson red hence the common name New Zealand Christmas Tree.

The wood is dense and strong and the Maori made weapons from the wood. Later Europeans used the wood in a wide range of constructions and boat building.

As it is vigorous and easy to grow, it is a popular street and lawn tree in mild-to-warm climates. At least 39 cultivars have been released.



Flowers of the New Zealand Christmas Tree

This iconic Kiwi Christmas tree often features on cards, stamps, in songs and poems and has become an important symbol for New Zealanders at home and abroad. It has a prominent place in Maori tradition. Legend tells of Tawhaki, a young Maori warrior who attempted to find heaven to seek help in avenging the death of his father. He fell to earth and the crimson flowers are said to represent his blood. According to mythology, the spirits of the dead travel to Cape Reinga at the very tip of the North Island on their journey to the afterlife. They are said to leap off the headland and climb the roots of a solitary 800-year old pohutukawa tree that grows there before descending to the underworld to return to their traditional homeland.

KNOW YOUR STREET NAMES



Beaconsfield Parade runs along the beachfront from Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, through Middle Park, ending at Esplanade East, Port Melbourne. It was formerly constructed in the late 1870s from a former rudimentary military road that linked the batteries of Sandridge, Emerald Hill and West St Kilda. In January 1879 the Mayor of Emerald Hill requested that it should be named Beaconsfield Parade after Benjamin Disraeli, 1st Earl of Beaconsfield, and British Prime Minister at the time.

Benjamin Disraeli served in the British government for three decades, twice as Prime Minister (1868; 1875 - 1880) – the first and only person of Jewish descent to do so, although Disraeli was baptised in the Anglican Church at an early age. Disraeli’s most lasting achievement was the creation of the Conservative Party after the Corn Laws schism of 1846. From 1852 onwards Disraeli’s career was also marked by his intense rivalry with William Gladstone. In 1876 Disraeli was raised to the peerage as the Earl of Beaconsfield, after nearly four decades in the House of Commons.

Before and during his political career Disraeli was well-known as a literary and social figure, although his novels are not generally regarded as belonging to the first rank of Victorian literature. He mainly wrote romances, of which Sibyl and Vivian Grey are perhaps the best-known.

John Robert Buxton, who built the grand mansion ‘Hughenden’ at 177 Beaconsfield Parade, so admired the British Prime Minister that he named his house after Disraeli’s family home.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



Can you spot the difference between this street sign and the one above? And where are these signs located?
Hint: you will need to look outside Middle Park

Your Committee

President:	Max Nankervis
Vice-President:	Vacant
Secretary:	Vacant
Treasurer:	Sonya Cameron
Liaison officer:	Diana Phoenix
Committee members:	Rosemary Goad
	Meyer Eidelson
	Annette Robinson
Oral history:	Anne Miller

Meeting Schedule

Monday 1 February, 7:30pm - The Story of St. Vincent’s Gardens: 150 Years of History by Lynsey Poore

Monday 4 April, 4pm - Albert Park Community Playground, by David Robinson

Venue: meetings are held at the Middle Park Bowling Club

MIDDLE PARK HISTORY GROUP Inc. PO Box 5276, Middle Park 3206

Email: middleparkhistorygroup@gmail.com Website: www.middleparkhistory.org