

MIDDLE PARK HISTORY GROUP



Photograph: Rose Stereograph Co. State Library of Victoria

Editorial

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After 17 issues over a period of over 4 years John Stirling has decided it is someone else's turn to compile the newsletter. The task has fallen to me. Twenty plus years editing a scientific journal should have given me some training in the skills required. I have tried to follow the format that worked so well in the past but have introduced a few of my own quirks and preferences.

Of course the editor's responsibility is not to write the newsletter, only to compile it. Although I may contribute segments from time to time, my first

chore is to call on members to consider contributing articles. The newsletter has been made possible especially through the regular contributions of a few writers, notably on Middle Park's former churches, its architecture and on street trees. A couple of these series will continue but the newsletter's success depends on you. Please give it some thought, articles from 400 to 2000 words would suit but there really is no limit. Articles on local identities, organisations, buildings or localities, book reviews or in fact anything of local interest would be considered.

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Photos of times past would also add to the newsletter's appeal.

The MPHG committee works behind the scenes to keep the group running. It has organised a coterie of authors to publish a third book in our series. The committee membership is almost the same as it was when the group was first formed but is desperately keen for new members. The positions of vice-president and secretary are vacant and willing volunteers are sought. Please consider getting involved and contact the Group through its email or post box.

This issue continues the 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.

Max Nankervis discusses wood decoration on Middle Park houses, continuing his series on architectural styles.

And you are invited to search for another mystery object.

Did you know? At the 2011 Census, Middle Park had a population of 4,058. The next Australian census is scheduled to occur on 9 August 2016. What's your guess at the population then?

Gary Poore

Middle Park Street Trees No. 6: Snow-in-summer

Lynsey Poore

Snow-in-summer, otherwise known as the narrow-leaved paperbark or flax-leaved paperbark is a common street tree in Middle Park where it can be seen predominantly in Mills Street and Wright Street and elsewhere.

The tree is known to botanists as *Melaleuca linariifolia*. Melaleucas belong to the myrtle family, or Myrtaceae, and get their name from *melas*, meaning black and *leucos*, meaning white. This apparent contradiction refers to the black trunks and white branches of some species. The black trunks are probably due to past bush-fires. The species name of this species, *linariifolia*, means with leaves like *Linaria*, the genus name of what are called 'toadflax's' in Europe. *Melaleuca linariifolia* was first formally described in 1797 by James Smith for the Linnaean Society in London reporting 'This we are told by Mr White is a large tree, the bark of which is very thick and spongy serving the

purpose of tinder'.

The species is endemic in eastern Australia ranging from southeastern Queensland to southeastern New South Wales. It has been introduced to gardens in Victoria. Snow-in-summer favours low-lying areas of open forests and the margins of swamps and streams.



Snow-in-summer outside Middle Park Primary School



Snow-in-summer flower-heads in mass

Snow-in-summer is a medium tree 6–10 m high and 3–8 m wide with a spreading crown. The bark is very papery and cream. Flowering occurs from October to January with the perfumed terminal flower-heads being 25 mm across and made up of 4–20 individual flowers in each head. Colour ranges from white to pale cream. The flower-heads are very profuse, cover the whole tree and can be really spectacular giving rise to the common name, 'snow-in-summer'. Following fertilisation by insects, especially bees, the flowers develop into woody capsules.

It is an excellent tree for parks and gardens, for windbreaks and as a screen as it is frost-hardy and will grow in a wide range of soils. It is a popular street tree in Melbourne. While it is an attractive small tree attracting honey-eaters and insects, its roots can damage water pipes and the tree is easily ignited during bush-fires (unlikely in Middle Park). The leaves are rich in oils especially terpin-4-ol. A related species, the

narrow-leaved paperbark *Melaleuca alternifolia* from the central Australian coast, is cultivated to produce tea-tree oil, a so-called 'essential oil' used in skin care and to relieve coughs and colds. Its oils are both antifungal and antibiotic.

The City of Port Phillip Street Tree Planting Guide:

http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/tree_planting_selection.htm#Street Tree Planting guide does not include snow-in-summer in its list of recommended trees for Middle Park but does list the species and remarks that it is 'adaptable to many soil types. Commonly used in streets throughout city. Useful urban tree that is much maligned.'

A range of small cultivars such as 'Snowstorm' and 'Seafoam' are suitable for gardens.

Photos by the author

Wood decoration in Middle Park houses

Max Nankervis

Earlier articles in the Newsletter explored the use of cast iron in Middle Park, both as architectural decoration in houses, and in a more utilitarian way for fences, gates and street furniture. In general, this use of cast iron in residential (and even industrial) buildings was a common feature in early to mid-Victorian architecture, especially in Melbourne, as E. Graeme Robertson demonstrated in his research. However, from the 1860s on, especially in England, a new theory (and practice) of architecture and the plastic arts was emerging. It was a mode which emphasised hand-crafted art and architecture, perhaps as a reaction to the miracle of mechanisation which had engulfed the world (especially England) from the beginning of the 19th century.

The main proponents of this approach were those who espoused and were adherents to the *Arts and Crafts Movement*. Perhaps the keystone of this movement was William Morris and the craftsmen attached to Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire in England. Here, the emphasis was on hand-crafted products, and wood was especially suitable for producing shapes, especially in furniture and decoration.

Along with this decorative approach was something of a revolt against the excessive decoration of Victorian art and architecture. Simplicity was espoused in such things, and so, instead of every wall being carved (or rendered) with a variety of shapes and fixtures, often in a melange of mock classical architectural themes, a simple brick or stone wall was seen as more tasteful. Indeed, the most notable piece of

architecture from that period is perhaps the 'Red House', which, as its name suggests, is somewhat starkly red-brick with minimal applied decoration. But this move towards 'simplicity' (and 'honesty') in art and architecture ultimately lead to 'modernism' which was a strong theme in architecture of the 1930s and beyond. The early architectural efforts of Rennie Macintosh in Scotland gave an extraordinary hint of the future of simplicity in art and architecture, while more locally Harold Desbrowe Anear's architecture, arising out of his adherence to the Arts and Crafts Movement, hinted at an emerging modernism.

Perhaps a third 'movement' or force, one which derived more from Europe, especially France, was the style now called 'Art Nouveau'. This style particularly emphasised graceful curves, often in a flow from convex to concave, similar to a clef in music writing. Perhaps the most famous rendition of this style is seen in some of the entrance signs to the Paris Metro.

So, as the century wore on, these forces began to permeate Western (especially British-based) and, despite the tyranny of distance, Australian architecture. Like any movement, there is no precise date when things changed. However, the economic depression of the early 1890s does seem to have been a pivotal point. Austerity, brought on by the economic collapse of the 1870-1890 boom which produced such flamboyant architecture, gave an additional practical reason to espouse a simpler form of architecture. But, even without that, Australians

were very much attached to the latest fashions derived from ‘the home country’, England (or UK in general), and so an architectural fashion emerged in Australia, albeit with a regional and even local expression. This general architectural style had various local variants and indeed nomenclature. In New South Wales the title ‘Federation Architecture’ is commonly used while in Victoria the description ‘Edwardian’ is more often used. Both titles relate the architectural style, with their regional variations, to historical events and people. Less commonly (in Australia) it is referred to as ‘Queen Anne’ style architecture.

So, from about 1890, notwithstanding that the early part of that decade restricted urban development, housing began to take on the forms of the Arts and Crafts Movement, with a touch of Art Nouveau, and utilised wood as a decorative medium. Although, in most cases the wood decoration was largely mass-produced rather than hand-crafted. Except for a few areas (e.g., northern Canterbury Road, eastern Kerferd Road) most sites in Middle park were developed between 1895 and 1925. In this way it missed

out on both the exuberance of Victorian architecture and ultra simplicity of Modernism. The result was something of a museum of Arts and Crafts , and to a lesser extent, Art Nouveau decoration.

How was this form of art displayed in the local houses? Perhaps the most dominant exterior material was red brick, and indeed red ‘Marseilles’ terracotta tiles set in a high, single-pitch, hipped main roof as opposed to the slate roofed, multi-valley roofs of Victorian Architecture. This is reflected in the ‘Red House’ designed as early as 1860 by Phillip Webb and William Morris constructed of plain red bricks and steep, tiled roofs. But the local, Melbourne, variant of this was unable to resist some decoration, and in Middle Park many, even most houses, at least on the facade, display one or two contrasting bands (often stucco rather than brick) at waist height.

But the other dominant design feature is the use of wood for both the ubiquitous veranda posts and frieze, features which were formerly cast iron. What is of interest though, is the variety of decorative styles which demonstrate



Fig. 1. Simple square balusters and Art Nouveau influenced bracket, with two-dimensional fretwork balusters.



Fig. 2. Frieze of cast iron inserts in wood frame and veranda gable.



Fig. 3 Geometric shape in frieze.

the 'art' aspect – by way of curves and shapes, but also the 'craft' aspect by way of wood, lathe-turned sections. The styles are of some interest because they range from geometric simplicity – thus hinting at the rise of 'modernism', through shapely lathe-turned sections to simple or elaborate fretwork with sinuous curves reflecting the Art Nouveau style. Later, in the early part of the 20th century some expressions of woodwork took on a slightly more two-dimensional aspect with the use of broad panels as frieze inserts or balusters, often with a simple shape cut out (rather than square or turned spandrels) as can be seen in figure.1.

As with all movements, they do not evolve overnight. And so it was with the shift from cast iron to wood. In many houses the frieze is made up of a wood outline containing cast iron panels, sometimes in Victorian fussiness, but in other examples hinting at modernism by way of geometric shapes as figures 2 and 3 show. Similarly, in some examples, wooden friezes are supported by cast iron posts, while in others, turned wooden posts have cast iron Corinthian capitals attached at the frieze level as in figure 4.

But of course, at least in the case of Middle Park houses which were largely 'spec' built (i.e., built by a builder/entrepreneur for sale) rarely were these shapes completely hand-crafted as one-off items. Rather they were mass-produced by machines with (by today's standards) a high degree of labour input. And so, a closer inspection will often demonstrate a frequent

repetition of elements in posts, brackets and friezes. For the builder it was simply a matter of combining the various commercially available sections to produce a design. Often builders of a row of several houses (or a terrace) incorporated alternating designs thus giving each house a touch of individuality.

Nevertheless, there are some quite individual uses of wood in the veranda decoration in Middle Park, including those which more strongly exhibited the Art Nouveau theme. The example in figure 5 is particularly elaborate though it was probably machine-made using a mechanised bandsaw.

A good example of the geometric (and thus perhaps pre-modern decoration can be seen in figure 6. Here the pattern is extremely simple while figure 7 demonstrates a much more elaborate pattern which would require considerable more handwork.

Another dominant feature of the local variation of Arts and Crafts architecture is the incorporation of gable sections in the facade, especially where the house was double-fronted and asymmetrical and the roof of the projecting section was finished in a gable, rather than a hipped roof (as was common in Victorian asymmetrical houses). In others, especially the non-asymmetrical double-fronted facades, the veranda was given a small central gable, as in figure 2. In larger houses, of which there are few in Middle Park, gables became a dominant architectural device. These gable ends also



Fig. 4. Cast iron Corinthian capital attached to wood post, with turned balusters on frieze.



Fig. 5. Art Nouveau influenced fretwork brackets.



Fig. 6. Geometric design wood frieze.

became the subject of wood decoration, though often set on a rough, stippled stucco base, giving a hint of Elizabethan half-timbered buildings, a period and style which the Arts and Crafts group particularly admired. In some cases the gable's barge-boards were also the subject of decoration, though generally they were unadorned except for the ends which sometimes incorporated a scroll. The gables also afforded another opportunity to express artistry and variation, ranging from the simple to the elaborate. However some themes do seem to recur. One common motive is a semi-circular half-moon, while a more common one is a simpler fan-shaped array, both motifs perhaps reflecting to some extent the then current interest in Japanese decorative themes as in figure 8.

It was not only on the outside of houses that the decorative materials shifted to wood. The interiors also generally included more wood decoration than Victorian houses. For example, while Victorian fireplace surrounds were (at least in 'quality' houses) marble, the new movement tended to use wooden surrounds, often incorporating an elaborate wooden overmantel, with various small projecting shelves and mirrors as in figure 9 (in contrast to Victorian mirrors which hung above the fireplace as a separate item). The designs of these overmantels were sometimes geometric



Fig. 7. Elaborate fretwork frieze and brackets.

and simple in outline though some hinted at Art Nouveau style incorporating sinuous curves.

Another interior use of wood decoration was in fretwork friezes across the hallway as a means of breaking the length or often demarking the formal front of the house from the lesser rooms at the rear. Whereas Victorian houses usually incorporated a stuccoed arch, this period generally used a fretwork frieze or screen at the same point as seen in figure 10. These fretwork friezes, while a stock item, also varied from simple to elaborate.

Finally, in another expression of hand-crafted wood (and economics), front-fence styles shifted from the elaborate Victorian cast iron form to a more simple wooden picket fence. While some houses continued to include cast iron, spear like posts with elaborate cast iron pillars at each end, most houses appear to have had a picket fence. And in some few cases, consistent with the 'red' theme of the architecture, some houses had a matching red-brick front fence, sometimes incorporating spears as can be seen in figure 11.

Because most development in Middle Park occurred between 1895 and 1925, and was strongly residential and built on relatively small sites (and thus largely not re-subdivided), it has been left to us almost as a museum of middle class housing in the Arts and Craft/Art Nouveau



Fig. 8. Fan-shaped decoration on gable.



Fig 9. Wood fireplace surround.



Fig. 10. Hall fretwork panel.

style. It was recognised for this quality as early as 1975 by the Whitlam Labor government's Australian Heritage Commission, being the first area (rather than individual site) nomination. Fortunately, due to state planning controls, the streetscapes have remained largely unaltered, though more recent planning applications, and in some cases planning permits, have begun to undermine the unique fabric of the area. It is to be hoped that the Council and the planning tribunal, VCAT, work to keep the fabric intact.



Fig. 11. Brick fence with iron railings.

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- Heritage Victoria. & Building Commission (Victoria). (2004). *What house is that? : a guide to Victoria's housing styles*. YBE, Melbourne.
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Photos by John Stirling

MPHG activities

February meeting

Lynsey Poore spoke to almost 50 members and friends on the history and landscape of St Vincent Gardens in Albert Park. Her presentation included modern illustrations and numerous postcards from last century. She outlined the layout of the gardens which has persisted almost unchanged since 1855 and how its designers Sir Andrew Clarke and Clement Hodgkinson had chosen trees and placed garden beds to maximise the recreation of the local community.

April meeting

David Robinson spoke and illustrated with photos, movies and TV news items the history of building the Albert Park Community Playground. His entertaining and informative talk explained all the preparation and negotiation that took place before the playground was built in the space of five days in May 1993. The effort involved hundreds of children and adults from the local area and beyond. David was awarded Citizen of the Year for his work in managing and driving the community project to fund and build the playground. The structure still stands and is enjoyed by many.

Mystery object?

Contributed by Max Cameron. Answer next newsletter.

Newsletter No. 17 illustrated two street signs, both for Beaconsfield Pde, one misspelled as Beaconsfeld. Perhaps one of the letters simply fell off.

Look for the titles of future talks on the last page of this newsletter.

Middle Park history volume 3

After the success of its two published books, MPHG is in the throes of preparing a third in the series. The next book hopes to deal with how world events and social change has affected Middle Park and the way we live. One chapter will focus on shops and shopping, particularly the types of shops, corner shops, dairies, light industry, and their disappearance. Another chapter will look at changes in the 'socio-economic classes' of people who live in Middle Park and how these have affected the built environment – particularly a return to valuing Victorian and Edwardian houses. Another chapter will look at the effect of the wars on Middle Park and detail the lives of some of the soldiers through their diaries and letters. Another chapter will look at the rise and fall of Middle Park societies and clubs – such as the Bowling Club, swimming and life-saving clubs, etc. Another will examine the criminal underworld of Middle Park. And a final chapter will look at the influx of migrants, particularly from Greece, after WW2 and include some of the oral interviews.



MPHG meeting schedule

Monday 6 June 2016	Meyer Eidelson	Melbourne dreaming: Melbourne's Aboriginal history
Monday 1 August 2016	Gary Poore	Digging in the swamp: a prehistory
Monday 3 October 2016	Marree Wilson	Never forget Uncle Les: one man's journey through history, 1914–1918
Monday 5 December 2016	Elisabeth Hore, Vice-president, Friends of the St Kilda Cemetery	The cultural significance of cemeteries to our community

All meetings are at 7:30 pm at the Middle Park Bowling Club
(through the underpass at the end of Armstrong Street and turn sharply left past the greens)

Your MPHG 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

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The City of Port Phillip

