

14

Esplanade Hotel 11 The Esplanade, St Kilda

Just in time for the opening of the rail connection to St Kilda in 1857, the New Bath Hotel opened on this site in that year. Its orientation facing the beach and its name referring also to that English Eighteenth Century resort town *par excellence* both evoked pleasure. Bath was the first resort attractive for social *élan* rather than just health reasons, social pleasure personified.

The New (bathing) Bath was not open for another three years. But the owner of the new hotel, James Stewart Johnston co-owner of the *Argus* newspaper (1843-52) and sometimes its acting manager, MLC for St Kilda, alderman of the City of Melbourne and councillor of the Shire of Bulla, was not going to wait around. It had 22 bedrooms, six sitting rooms and a bar, surrounded by over a hectare of formal gardens: 'tea gardens, to which will be added two bowling alleys upon the American principle, a large quoiting ground, throwing the hammer and a variety of other amusements'. It was known for the quality of its food and its genteel patrons.

That November the New Bath Hotel hosted an exhibition for the St Kilda Horticultural Society, including 'choice specimens of geraniums, fuchsias and pansies'. The 40th Regiment played music, perhaps the *Argos's* report is the first ever of a musical performance on the site of The Espy.



Esplanade Hotel, 1881

In 1861, the licence was transferred to Charles Wedel & Moss and the New Bath became the Criterion. In 1864, Johnston sold the hotel to John Duerdin who also acquired a house adjacent. Three years later, both buildings were demolished, though the site lay vacant for ten years, known as the Criterion's paddock.

In 1874, the hotel site was sold to James Orkney, MLA for West Melbourne and owner of other Melbourne hotels, leader of Scots' Church (no temperance problem there!) and founding member of the Melbourne Harbour Trust. In 1877, he commissioned architects Smith and Johnson to design a new brick residential terrace for the site, to be known as the Esplanade. It is possible that the hotel's floor plan could have accommodated three substantial terraces, facing the sea. Orkney changed his mind (thank goodness!) and The Esplanade became a 60-roomed hotel, which was completed in 1878. Orkney owned all of the land between Pollington and Victoria Streets. It included his Italianate villa Orcadia, and a licensee's house in Victoria Street.

The architects, Alfred Louis Smith (c1830-1907) and Arthur Ebdon Johnson (c1823-95) were Londoners who each worked for important English designers: Smith for designing builder, Thomas Cubitt and Johnson for the fine architect Philip Hardwick. Johnson was talented and won the Soane medal and a Royal Institute of British Architects prize. He advanced in Melbourne due to the patronage of his uncle, pastoralist Charles Ebdon. Smith and Johnson met whilst working in the Colonial Architect's Department and together they designed many major public buildings in Melbourne (several now demolished), including the General Post Office (1859-67), Supreme Court (1874-84), Melbourne Athenæum

(1885-86) and Eastern Hill Fire Station (1892-93). In 1856, with T.J. Crouch (44), they were founders of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects.

The first publican and lessee of The Esplanade was James Grant Hay. Mark Twain visited Melbourne in the 1880s and is said to have stayed at the Esplanade under his real name, Samuel Clements. In 1888, Sigismund Jacoby became lessee and in 1892-94 and 1908-09, he became Mayor of St Kilda.

In 1892, the Esplanade's most famous resident, Alfred Felton (1882-1904) an industrial chemist, arrived to live there until he died. He arrived in Melbourne in 1853 and in 1867, with Frederick Sheppard Grimwade, and they formed the wholesale druggists Felton, Grimwade and Company. Their partnership lasted 50 years, becoming Drug Houses of Australia. Another of his ventures, Melbourne Glass Bottle Works became Australian Glass Manufacturers, now ACI Packaging Group. With Charles Campbell, Felton acquired the grazing properties of Langi Kal Kal in Victoria and Murray Downs in New South Wales.

Felton lived in a downstairs sitting room only 7.5 x 4.5m, using an upstairs bedroom. The sitting room was packed with pictures hung from every inch of wall and stacked against walls, with bookshelves overflowing, piles of catalogues, unopened copies of *The Spectator* and *The Times* and an indiscriminate collection of decorative arts. He was a keen collector of recorded music and owned one of the first cylinder gramophones his visitors had seen.

On his death, Felton gave £383,000 of his £500,000 estate to the National Gallery of Victoria. Invested wisely, the Felton Bequest money still purchases works for the gallery, a century later. Within fifty years, it had transformed the Melbourne gallery from a little-known provincial collection to a financially well-endowed institution, with an international reputation for great masterpieces. At the Esplanade, the tradition of Felton's passion for the arts continues today, with its music concerts, comedy, photographic exhibitions, theatre, and the Melbourne Writers' Festival.

By 1914 both owner James Orkney and his widow Margaret had died and the Esplanade was sold to Edward and Martin Hoban. Peter McQuade was the lessee. Significantly by 1920, the lessee was Thomas Carlyon, of Carlyon's Hotel, corner of Bourke and Spencer Streets. Carlyon had architects Gibbs and Finlay make renovations and additions, including a ballroom. Sarah Bernhardt, the great actress is said to have stayed at the Esplanade with an entourage of 12 assorted animals.

Carlyon's Esplanade became a premier jazz and dance venue. It was enormously popular, with music night after night. In 1924 his Eastern Tent Ballroom initiated popular nights when evening dress was optional and party nights which were formal. Overseas musicians were imported and locals, particularly in jazz, were encouraged and defended.

T.S Carlyon died in 1925. In 1927 T.S. Carlyon Junior established the famous Green Mill Dancehall on the site of Wirth's Circus (now the Victorian Arts Centre site). With his brother Norman he also had interests in the Ambassador Hotel, the Hotel Australia and a

Spencer Street hotel. The licensee's house was demolished to build the Spanish Mission style Baymor Flats, in 1930 (10), demolished in 2004.

At the side of the hotel was a rockery where big bands played in the '30s and '40s. Entertainment in the '50s and '60s was mainly Saturday nights with television performers such as Harold Blair, Ron Lees and Barry Crocker.

In 1937, alterations by hotel architects Sydney Smith, Ogg & Serpell in the north-west corner created a new public bar. The Esplanade of the '40s and '50s like the George Hotel in Fitzroy Street was a resort for families from the country and half the rooms let were permanents; many were wealthy. Their rooms were carefully decorated and comfortable. There was a good restaurant. But in 1952, the owner, Edward Hoban died and in 1954 the hotel owner became the Cooke family. By then however, no real permanents remained. The owner's villa, Orcadia was demolished to build the Bottle Shop. St Kilda was plummeting in freefall as both holiday and resort destination

Within the year, the Esplanade was sold to Leon Wolowski who held it for twelve years. During the 1960s, the 'Snakepit' basement bar was a rendezvous for prostitutes on their work-breaks. By 1973, the Esplanade was proposed as the venue for Melbourne's first casino. The owners Sands Pty Ltd proposal was for a 20 storey 600 bed hotel, with no poker machines. But the musical tradition continued. By 1979, The Esplanade was one of the few venues in Melbourne where jazz continued to be played, as it had been since the 1920s and that was nurturing Australian music.

In 1987 Eildon Pty Ltd again proposed an 18 storey building with the old hotel refurbished and 85 serviced apartments overhead.



Esplanade Hotel, 2004

Over the past 25 years, 'the Espy' has been crucial in promoting cutting-edge Australian popular music. From 1994-98 there were over 300 live recording sessions there, with about 25 different acts performing live each week. It operated three venues in simultaneous performance, for both paying and non-paying audiences, as well as its support for the other arts. No other hotel in Melbourne fulfils all these roles. Performers closely associated with the Espy include: Dave Graney, Kate Cebrano, Steve Cummings, Deborah Conway, Paul Kelly, Archie Roach and Rubie Hunter, Men at Work, Painters and Dockers, Bachelors from Prague and Renee Geyer. In comedy, the Espy has been essential in establishing the careers of Greg Fleet, Anthony Morgan, Trevor Marmalade and Martin & Molloy.

By 1988-89 there was community concern that development proposals threatened 'the Espy' and activism by Save St Kilda and Turn the Tide began. In 1990 the National Trust responded by classifying the hotel. In 1992 Save St Kilda wrote a Community Charter fearing that another ownership transfer from Evinden Pty.Ltd to Santope Pty.Ltd may end the live music. The transfer was averted. In 1994 a fire risk caused final eviction of all remaining permanent guests for the first time in its 112 years. 65 poker machines were proposed. From 1995, Carlton and United Breweries briefly owned the hotel.

In 1997 it was bought by the Becton Corporation's Becton Esplanade Pty Ltd as one of Melbourne's 'premier development opportunities'. A design competition was announced with submission from Denton Carter Marshall, Billard Loece, Ashton Raggett McDougall, Alsop & Störmer of London, and Nation Fender Katsalidis. Some proposals included demolishing the Espy. An eminent panel of the developer's nominees selected a design by Nation Fender Katsalidis (11) of 38 stories which would demolish Baymor Court and part of the hotel. Local resident Alex Njoo wrote a warning letter to *The Age*: 'once more onto the breach'. The Esplanade Alliance, an extraordinarily powerful and well organised community group with the National Trust opposed the development. It represented residents, traders, ex-councillors, musicians, architects, artists, lawyers, and other community representatives. A rally in December 1998 was attended by a thousand people and 11,500 objections were collected, to a tower 'as high as Crown Casino'.

Earlier *The Age* headlined: '... Godzilla that will dwarf one of the city's favourite watering holes and music venues'. Inexplicably, Heritage Victoria in May 1998 refused to register the Esplanade, as not of state significance, a move which calls into doubt its own assessment criteria. The development was opposed by the two local Liberal MPs and the Liberal Premier, Jeff Kennett.

For over thirty years, The Espy has resisted proposals for high rise apartments or casinos which local people and professionals are adamant would be an over-development of the site.



Detail of Port Phillip Planning Scheme Amendment C25

In May, Becton agreed to sell the hotel section of the site. The Council introduced a Planning Scheme Amendment C25 to control the height and bulk of development around the old hotel to an absolute maximum height of 8-10 stories, stepping down to 3-5 stories. The Esplanade Alliance felt satisfied that they had opposed Becton for five years, and won. Indeed, in August, the Esplanade was sold, via a 200-year lease to nominee companies of Savin and Disordet Pty Ltd. Vince Sofo and Paul Adams of the Chevron nightclub and other cafes, restaurants and clubs. On 14 November 2002, the *Herald Sun* illustrated a new Becton design (still by Fender Katsalidis Associates), for a strongly horizontal, serpentine development: 60 apartments of ten stories over a three-storied podium at front. This proposal was also opposed by The Esplanade Alliance and refused by the City of Port Phillip, appealed to VCAT.

When John Farnham announced his The Last Time tour, he joked that he always dreamt of playing The Espy. Farnham's manager, Glenn Wheatley sent the hotel a demo tape which was accepted by The Espy's booking manager and so Whispering Jack finally played The Espy on 29 September 2002. In May 2003, Molly Meldrum and Glen Wheatley supported a push to a 3am license for the Espy. The Espy remains a venue for live music performance as it has most nights for eighty years and for general entertainment and hospitality, since 1857. The story is not yet over.

Notes

Historian Gillian Upton kindly informed me that she has sighted the publican's licence dated 1857 for the New Bath Hotel. Cooper is incorrect in having it as 'New Baths' and his error has been frequently perpetuated. 'Bath' as a link with the English resort, is Miles Lewis's point (refer: 11 The Esplanade). Note, 18 December 2002.

John Poynter's *Mr Felton's Bequest* was published after this Chapter was written, too late for its meticulous content to be used here.

Extracted from Richard Peterson: "A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People"
© 2005, St Kilda Historical Society Inc.

References

- Bisset, Andrew. *Black Roots White Flowers: A History of Jazz in Australia*. Golden Press. NSW 1979.
- Carson, Andrea. 'Street Fights: In the thick of it, they celebrate the saving of a community icon ... the Espy'. *The Age*. 13 May 2001.
- Cooper, J.B.. *The History of St Kilda: From its First Settlement to a City and After*. Vols. 1 & 2. Printers. Melbourne 1931. p226.
- de Kraster, Leela and van Nooten, Brocke. 'Legends aid Espy bid to rock on' *Herald Sun* 21 May 2003.
- Giggney, H.J. & Smith, Ann G, *A Biographical Register 1788-1939, Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Canberra 1987, pp 265 & 371.
- Keenan, Aileen. 'Espy' hotel sold to business pair'. *The Age*. 21 August 2001.
- Lindsay, Daryl. *The Felton Bequest. An Historical Record. 1904-1959*. Oxford. Melbourne 1963. pp 1-3 & *passim*.
- Munroe, Ian. 'Trust Power v. Espy Tower'. Letter. *The Sunday Age*. 15 November 1998. p5.
- National Trust of Australia (Victoria), File No: 6130.
- Njoo, Alex. 'Once more unto the breach'. Letter. *The Age*. 12 September 1997.
- Poynter, John. *Mr Felton's Bequest* Miegunyah Press. Carlton 2003.
- Revisiting Major Planning Proposals. 1980-2000*. pp4-39.
- The Argus*. 8 November 1857.
- Timothy Hubbard Pty.Ltd. *The Esplanade Hotel. A Report to the Heritage Council of Victoria in support of a nomination by the City of Port Philip*. 22 April 1998.