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Prince of Wales Hotel 29 Fitzroy Street (Cnr Acland Street), St Kilda.

A Prince of Wales Hotel was built on this site in the nineteenth century. It was an unpretentious drinking pub and demolished in 1936. The present stylish Prince represented a dramatic change in direction. It was designed by the prolific hotel architect Robert H. McIntyre and completed in 1937. Hansen & Yuncken were the builders. McIntyre was the father of Peter McIntyre, Emeritus Professor of Architecture at the University of Melbourne and important and innovative Modernist architect from the mid-1950s. But Robert could turn his mind to a number of architectural styles, of which the Streamlined Moderne at the Prince is but one.

It had four swish stories with projecting balconies over a square plan, with aerodynamic horizontal lines and its name lettered in steel ribbon. At left, the residential entrance was faced with black (Vitrolite) Carrara glass with the motif of the Prince of Wales feathers in stainless steel, superimposed. The flagpole surmounting the crystalline tower of two floors had a red 'airport' observation light. There were 44 bedrooms and a dining room seating 120. As a Moderne residential resort hotel, it compared only with the Cumberland, Lorne (demolished), the Carlton, cnr Malop and Geringhap Streets, Geelong (somewhat smaller and plainer) and the larger Modernist Hotel Australia, Collins Street (1939, demolished).

It is said that from the start it successfully attracted a young, stylish clientele, the smart set, for almost twenty years. 'Nothing was spared in the way of comfort and convenience'. For the hotel, this represented a shift away from concentrating on the bar trade, to attract dining and residential clientele, with function rooms and comfortable lounges with fireplaces and leather armchairs over two levels and 'carpets on all the floors'.

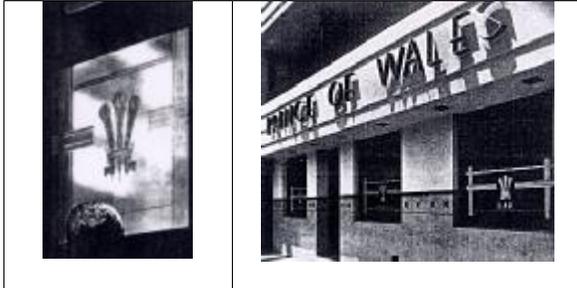
In January 1936 King George V died and was succeeded as king by his son, the Prince of Wales who became Edward VIII. Edward's reign lasted less than a year, until the Empire held its breath as he abdicated, under a black cloud, in order to marry his lover, Mrs Wallis Simpson. They became the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

It is extremely odd that the name 'Prince of Wales' should be perpetuated in the new, glamorous hotel, just as the sorry tragedy of that other Prince of Wales, inexorably unfolded. I hope that the reason was sheer Australian bloody-mindedness towards Britain and its monarch, but I suspect not in 1936. Or was it a demonstration of solidarity towards the extremely stylish (yet empty-headed) former Prince of Wales. One wonders then, did hotels named the 'Duke of Windsor' open in Melbourne in 1937?



Prince of Wales Hotel, 1997

The etched glass windows at first floor level include the triple feathers emblem, similar to the *fleur-de-lis*, of the Prince of Wales. They were the earliest known designs by the eminent Australian theatre designer, Loudon Sainthill (1919-69), immediately after his (and only) education at the Melbourne Technical College Art School (now RMIT University), in about 1936. Sainthill went to England in 1939 (after his first exhibition in Melbourne earlier in the year), where he remained for the rest of his life. He designed sets for the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon, for Sadlers Wells, and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. His diverse range of styles influenced a whole range of Australian designers and established a tradition of Australian theatre design. Later, another internationally successful St Kilda theatre designer was Kenneth Rowell (28).



Details of Prince of Wales Hotel

The Prince of Wales was used as a headquarters for the United States military forces in Melbourne during World War II, attracting the US military to the streets of St Kilda, arguably as subjects for artists such as Albert Tucker (9).

There were no major alterations to the building until the 1960s, when all the bedrooms were modernised and a small sympathetic addition made at the rear. In the 1970s, further major alterations were made. A large multi-storey carpark was erected at the rear of the hotel, facing Jackson Street and a supermarket in the basement, shops and arcade were inserted off Acland Street, with a large function room at first floor (the former dining room?), accessible from the Fitzroy Street entrance. This became known as the Band Room. The first floor balcony was enclosed as a cocktail lounge. A new canopy was installed over the entrance and the black Vitrolite and Prince of Wales motif sadly removed.

From 1937, the new hotel attracted a homosexual clientele. The east section of the public bar has had gay drinkers since it opened. Some present customers have been drinking there for over 40 years, yet it is rarely mentioned in the gay press, or in gay guides. It is the oldest gay bar in Victoria: no other Melbourne gay bar has survived from before 1980. Doug Lucas (b1950), recalled:

The Prince of Wales has always had a gay bar as long as I can remember. You couldn't move there on Friday and Saturday nights. The bar next to the gay one in the Prince of Wales was the straightest roughest bar in town and you'd have the one next to it just full of people screaming and hooting and having a good time, never any problems at the POW.

In 1977, the gay dances organised by Jan Hillier since the late 1960s, migrating to various venues across Melbourne, perhaps to avoid police raids, settled into regular Sunday nights at the Prince of Wales. This was 'Pokeys' nightclub held in the first floor Band Room. It attracted thousands. It was organised by Hillier and Doug Lucas, who was also running a gay bar at the Union Hotel in North Carlton. Compered by ('Ellie') Lucas, there is no doubt that the Pokeys floor show was world class, with as much glitz and glamour as Hollywood.



The shows included spectacular and most professional drag cabaret performances starring showgirls Renée Scott, Terri Tinsel, Debra La Gae, Michelle Tozer, Wanda Jackson and Doug Lucas: 'the Pokey's original dreamgirls,' in shows such as 'Women of the Eighties,' and songs such as 'Its not where you start, its where you finish,' 'You're my world' and 'I believe in dreams'. Doug explained that they would apply for one late license each month, which meant you could trade until 1.30am instead of 11.30pm, out by 12 midnight. Almost half a million customers paid to see Pokeys between 30 October 1977 and 13 March 1992.

Mischa Merz, who rented for \$25 a week in Jackson Street, described:

...my nights...punctuated by the sound of men in high heels going to and from the Prince of Wales, the slamming of doors and the squeal of tyres...sirens, screams, shouting and the sound of breaking glass almost every night.. Like scenes from Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* on a loop. Neon signs, odd characters, men dressed as women, bad people offering you a good time for a price. Friends and family were a little concerned. Some were too frightened even to visit. It was my idea of utopia.

Since 1996, the Gay Pride March has been held each year in Fitzroy Street in early February, as part of the Midsumma Festival; with the balcony of the Prince as a particular spectator focus. The procession of 50,000 diverse and colourful participants begins from the Ian Johnson Oval and terminates in the Catani Gardens, to party until midnight. The march has occurred intermittently since 1973, but now seems happily settled in St Kilda.

The Band Room and the ground floor corner piano bar also became major pub music venues for Melbourne's emerging alternative music scene in the late 1970s, especially punk rock and New Wave bands. Other venues in St Kilda catering to this alternative scene included the Seaview Ballroom (now the George Hotel Apartments), Fitzroy Street; the Espy (13); The Venue, Upper Esplanade (demolished); the Palace and the Aphasia, Lower Esplanade. Bands to be heard included: Dave Graney and the Coral Snakes, the Black-eyed Susans, the Earthmen, the Cosmic Psychos, the Buzzards, Rock 'n' Roll Wrestling VI, Spiderbait, the Mavis's, Dave Last's Autogas, Fireballs, Sonic Youth, Rancid, Tricky and the extremely bizarre Lydia Lunch.

In 1996, the hotel's freehold was sold to John and Frank Van Haandel, the proprietors of the most successful Stokehouse Restaurant in Jacka Boulevard, St Kilda. A period of almost 20 years of gay cabaret, rough-house and drunken rock 'n' roll abruptly ended on 31 August.

In 1998, when redevelopment of the Prince was announced, a group of St Kilda film makers were determined to immortalise the apocalyptic moment on celluloid. Film director Lawrence Johnson described the atmosphere they sought to record: 'There is a sense of violence, of danger, around this area and especially around this pub and its bars... out-of-towners visited St Kilda at the weekend because of its notorious reputation and the pub because of its social history... there were a lot of stories associated with this bar like when women weren't allowed in here and they used to pass drinks at through the windows'. *Last Drinks* was completed in 1998, directed by Kate Morrow.

The groundswell change-of-life that has infused Fitzroy Street, Acland Street and parts of Carlisle and Inkerman Streets over the past decade, began at Caffé Maximus (7), designed by architect Alan Powell (13) in 1988. This has reached its apogee in the most recent incarnation at the Prince, again by Powell, completed over 1998-99, as it pitches its play to where it all began in 1937, when a beer-house was reclaimed for the smart set.

McIntyre's Streamlined exterior has been largely recovered, including the classy black-tiled piers. The rougher bars of the ground level and the Band Room have been subtly consolidated. Dramatic gesture, illusion and clever design intervention, sweep patrons up a dramatic stair to the first floor. There is a slender sleek cocktail bar; a vaporous restaurant, Circa at the Prince and an internal courtyard to ventilate the boutique hotel rooms on the upper floors. In October 1998 it won Australia's richest interior design prize, the Victorian Design Award.

In 2001, the Health Spa at the Prince was designed by the innovative architects, Wood Marsh Pty Ltd. Their previous St Kilda design is the exciting public toilets in the St Kilda Botanical Gardens, Blessington Street (1993). At the Health Spa, situated high above Fitzroy Street, ornate screens reflect eclectic St Kilda architectural references, to create a calm interior setting, beautiful and simple in effect.

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