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Brooklawn, Strathmore & The Villa 77-95 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda

This story begins with three Brooklawns: two houses in St Kilda and the tiny village in Ireland after which they were named; and the mother and daughter who owned them and lived in them.

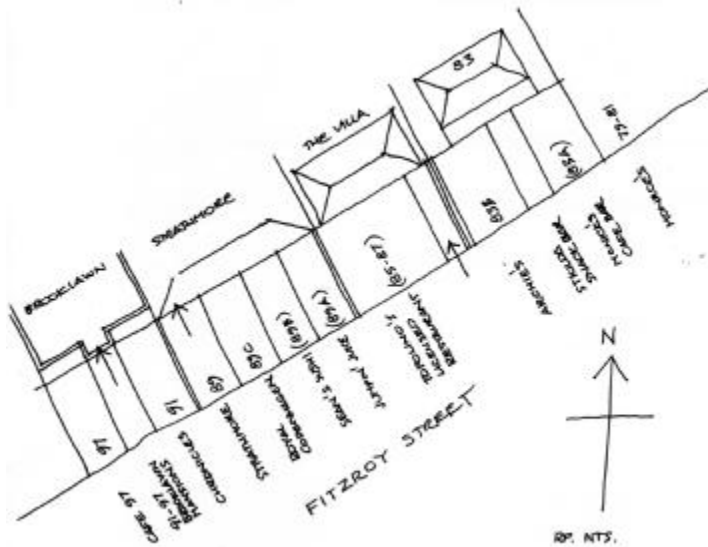
In March 1875, the Victorian colonial government confirmed the, until then uncertain, dimensions of the Albert Park reservation in the *St Kilda Advertiser*, (48). But then it made the bombshell announcement that it would sell the St Kilda Road frontage for house lots. This then unprecedented appropriation of parkland is a tactic that continues today, as Albert Park and Royal Park residents are well aware. The central block of three between Union Street, and Queens Terrace (now Queens Road) and Queens Lane was granted to G. Godfrey in November 1875. In 1879 it was re-sold to Isabella Bruce.

Isabella (d.1906) was the wife of George Williamson Bruce (1841-1903) who was born in the tiny village of Brooklawn, in County Leitrim, Ireland. Bruce arrived in Melbourne in 1861, to join his elder brother John Munro Bruce in the softgoods firm Laing and Webster. John already had seven years business in Ireland before arriving here three years earlier. In 1893 he became father to Stanley Melbourne Bruce, prime minister of Australia 1923-29. In 1869, George began his own business in Kyneton. Meanwhile John began his own softgoods import firm with a former workmate as Patterson, Laing and Bruce in 1879. Next year George left Kyneton to join the firm, who then added an extra storey to their building at 264 Flinders Lane, which was designed by the architect Charles Webb, reputedly making it the largest warehouse in Victoria. Later George became a partner in the Denton Mills Hats, Braeside Shirts and chairman of the commissioners of the (State) Savings Bank.

George, (who continued to be described as a warehouseman) and Isabella, their three sons and daughter were living at 11 Dundas Place, Emerald Hill (South Melbourne). About 1880-82, Bruce built a ten room house with stables at his wife's property at 82 Queens Terrace. He called it Brooklawn after the village where he was born. The architect may have been Edward Twentyman who designed Wombaleno, John's home in Kooyong Road, Toorak a few years later, and whose partner (after 1832), David Askew designed another warehouse in Flinders Lane for Paterson, Laing and Bruce in 1899. Twentyman and Askew were the architects of Block Arcade (1891 & 93) and offices, flour mills and houses around Melbourne. Another contender for the designer of this Brooklawn is the distinguished architect Charles Webb, who designed most of the Flinders Lane commercial accommodation for Paterson Laing and Bruce in the 1880s. It could even be a work of W.H. Ellerker & Co who tendered one house in St Kilda in 1880.

In 1893-94 till 1895-96, the dark Depression years, George Bruce was forced to let Brooklawn, to Laurence Benjamin, financier and gentleman. This was clearly whilst he awaited completion (unusually, during the Depression) of his larger mansion, Clarence (now The Mansion), next door at 83. The Queens Road Brooklawn continued to be let until at least 1905. The next year, Isabella died and the title passed to her husband. In 1908 he died also and, curiously for the time, the title by-passed the sons to their sister, Edith Loudon Bruce who continued to live there. But in 1913, she sold Brooklawn to Dr Marcel Crivelli, a founder of the Alliance Française established at 17 Robe Street, St Kilda. Edith moved to 91-97 Fitzroy Street, which she re-named Brooklawn, and operated as a boarding house.

As for the Queens Road Brooklawn, Dr Crivelli leased it to a series of qualified nurses who operated it as Lister Private Hospital. There were additions and alterations, particularly in 1927 by eminent architects Blackett and Forster. The 14-bed hospital lasted for 62 years. In 1932 it briefly became the Chinese consulate, subsequently a brothel, recently an office, then vacant, merely a car park. In 2001, both the Queens Road Brooklawn and The Mansion were demolished, to be replaced by a nondescript high-rise block of flats.



Plan of 77-95 Fitzroy Street, showing names of current shopfronts in front of the Brooklawn et al buildings, 2004

At 91-97 Fitzroy Street, Brooklawn had more luck. It is the most impressive of four grand Boom houses in this group. It was built on land bought in 1846 by Samuel Jackson (23) facing Albert Park. The designers of the other houses are not known.

In July 1880, architects Smith & Johnson called tenders for the owner Ruben Barnard, most probably for 91-97. It was constructed by 1882 when its rates were first paid. Six years earlier, Smith and Johnson had been architects for the Esplanade Hotel (14).

The other three houses: Strathmore, 89 Fitzroy Street; the Villa, 85-87 Fitzroy Street and 83 Fitzroy Street were built around 1881-82: their façades all align. All have elaborate Boom period façades, influenced by the Baroque architectural style. Each was set back behind lawns and pleasure gardens. As has frequently occurred in St Kilda, by 1914, the other houses were also boarding and vacation houses, part of the eleven houses in Fitzroy Street which comprised Irvine's Residential Establishments. Then, Brooklawn was occupied by a Miss Lilly. Edith Bruce's whereabouts are unknown.

It was probably in the 1950s that the (now nine) shops were cheaply built in the front gardens of the mansions, which in their time deteriorated. Brooklawn's shop at no 91 had by 1995 already closed and been secured by shutters. It had purveyed sex-mags and sex-toys. Brooklawn is said to have been used as both the French Consulate and a brothel, but at different times.

Later in the 1990s, the shops were reconstructed as more desirable and fashionable bars and cafés, and no. 90 (at Brooklawn) has become Chronicles bookshop. This was designed by architect Grant Amon referencing appropriately nautical images. In September 1994, Donleavy Fitzpatrick (7) was behind the Brooklawn redevelopment, but he withdrew. In April 1995, the million dollar redevelopment project proceeded, also designed by Grant Amon. By March 1996, desirable apartments in the new 'Brooklawn Mansions' were being advertised for sale.

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