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Eildon (Formerly Barham) 51 Grey Street, St Kilda

John Lang Currie (1818-98) was born at the village of Yarrow, south-east of Galasheils in the Scottish Borders, about 30 km south of Edinburgh. After a local grammar school education, at 21 he sailed to join his cousins, near Bulla. He saved and borrowed and in 1844 with school friend Tom Anderson, bought the 13,000 hectare pastoral property Larra in the shadow of Mt Elephant with 1,500 sheep, for £750. He began his stud with Saxon merinos from Van Diemens Land (Tasmania) and in 1849 added merino rams from Camden in New South Wales and was seeking the advice of its owner, Sir William Macarthur. In the 1860s he established the 'Larra lustre merino' with fine glossy long wool. Currie's success in developing the Australian merino wool was widely acknowledged and by 1870 its quality was unrivalled in Victoria. In London one bale was declared 'perfect'.

He sold rams all over Australia, South Africa and the USA. By the mid 1890s, he owned 32,375 hectares and 100,000 sheep, described as the finest sheepwalk in the world. He extended his interests to pastoral properties in New South Wales and Queensland. He was active in local Western District politics, but never sought election to the state Legislative Council. He gave substantial donations to Ormond College at the University of Melbourne, the Presbyterian Church of which he was an elder and other charities in Victoria.

He was chairman of the Victorian Woollen and Cloth Manufacturing Co. which was founded in 1865 as the first woollen mill in Victoria. In 1879 he became director of Australian Frozen Export Co, which first exported meat to the United Kingdom. He was a pillar of the Presbyterian Church in Victoria. He also owned an extensive collection of Australiana.

He built the Larra homestead in 1869, designed by Geelong architects Davidson and Henderson: a sternly romantic Tudor design with canted bay windows and towers, high bluestone walls and splendid stables. He also bought the mansion Osborne House in Swinburne Street, North Geelong; a severe Renaissance bluestone pile designed by another distinguished architect, Charles Webb of Webb & Taylor architects, in 1857. Twelve years later, Webb built a neighbouring house to Currie's in Grey Street.

In 1871 Currie was shipwrecked (as he was again in 1874!). Clearly these experiences had not alienated him from the sea, for by 1871, Currie had effectively retired to St Kilda. In 1871, he commissioned the most prolific Melbourne architects, Reed and Barnes to design his house, Eildon.

Indeed, John Currie's three houses were designed by some of the most distinguished of Victoria's nineteenth century architects, but Reed & Barnes were the most remarkable. Still flourishing today as Bates Smart, in their 150th year of practice, the firm founded by Joseph Reed in 1852 is probably Australia's oldest architectural practice. There have been nine name changes, but only 25 directors. They have made a significant contribution to architecture and development in Australia over that time, but particularly in Melbourne.

Their works include: ICI (Orica) House (1958), the Royal Exhibition Building (1880), the Trades Hall (1873-1926), Melbourne Town Hall (1867-70 & 1887), Federation Square (2002), the State Library (1854-1911), and Freshwater Place (2002-03), but few nineteenth century houses. The Gothic Clement Hodgkinson House, 157 Hotham Street, East Melbourne (1861), The Palladium Virginia, 116 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne (1864), the polychrome brick Carnally (Moorina), 160 George Street, East Melbourne (1864), the fantastic Euro-Raku, St Kilda (1886, demolished), Ripen Lea (1869), the Classical Culture House (1874), NW corner of Gimps and Owllet Streets, East Melbourne and the picturesque Kolora, south of Penshurst (1868-69) and the Emus, Kirrawee.



Eildon, 51 Grey Street, St Kilda, 2002

Eildon remains one of the largest houses in St Kilda and one of the larger surviving nineteenth century houses in Melbourne. It is double-storied and its seven-bay facade faces the sea, yet the rear elevation to Grey Street is also grandly architectural yet carefully detailed in the Baroque manner, with a continuous balustrade parapet. It has a double-storied arcuated and pilastered loggia derived from the designs of Bramante and Vignola of the Italian High Renaissance. It is flanked by pavilions with Palladian windows over canted bay windows. It remains intact, very near to where Frederick Barnes's own house stood.

It is clear from the 1871 tender notice that Currie's Eildon formed major additions to the earlier Barham House, now consumed within it, designed for Edward Bernard Green (1809-1861) by John Gill (c1797-1866), and out for tender in August 1850. After Wattle House, Barham House is the second earliest substantial building in St Kilda. Barham is a village in Kent, midway between Canterbury and Dover. Gill was the architect of Banyule in Heidelberg (1846), The Hawthorns (1846-47) and Invergowrie (attributed 1846). Each of these houses, still very much Regency in manner, have asymmetrical Picturesque Gothic composition and Tudor details.

Other Gill buildings include Collins Street Baptist Church (1845), St John's Anglican Church, Heidelberg (1849-51), and the severely Classical Royal Terrace (1853-58) and Goldsborough Mort Woolstore, 574-528 Bourke Street (cnr William Street, 1862). Interestingly in relation to Eildon, the Baptist Church offers another link between Gill and Reed. Gill's church was thought to survive behind Reed's portico, but it has now been proven that it was entirely demolished in 1861 and replaced by Reed's existing building.

Green was a prominent Melbourne city land owner and Honorary Secretary to the Melbourne Hospital. When he died in 1861, his executor was his neighbour, William Nicholson (1816-65), the Melbourne grocer who became alderman and then Lord Mayor of the City of Melbourne; then entered parliament in 1859 and immediately became Premier of Victoria (1859-60).

For the remaining four years of his life, Nicholson continued to manage Green's estate for his widow, who had returned to live in England. He owned the property immediately adjacent to the north in Grey Street, Fernleigh, with whose history it then became intertwined. Fernleigh in turn shared a boundary with Samuel Jackson's Wattle House (23). After becoming premier, Nicholson himself moved into Barham House, as it was much grander than Fernleigh.

When he died, his widow Sarah married Richard Twentymans and remained at Barham House until June 1870. A year earlier (August 1869), the Green Estate had been sold to Barham Currie, subject to their tenancy. But Sarah still owned Fernleigh. During 1869, the Twentymans commissioned Charles Webb (1821-98), to remodel and extend Fernleigh as a twenty (!) room mansion. They moved in and renamed it Mittagong. Within two years, Reed and Barnes had completed remodelling Barham for John Currie and he had renamed it Eildon. The Twentymans lived at Mittagong there for a decade until Richard's death in 1880.

Currie died at Eildon, eighteen years later, widely mourned. He left an estate of almost £500,000 to his wife Louise and his eight children. His sons John Lang and Charles Sibbald took over Larra. Mrs L. Currie continued to live at Eildon into the twentieth century. In the 1920s, Eildon was subdivided, by formation of Eildon Road, off Church Square and from about 1930 it became a guesthouse. A second storey was added to the house. The colonnade still clearly overlooked the bay, the stables still survived to the side and the gardens still swept down to Church Square.

Richard Peterson: A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People

In the 1930s, Mittagong the only Charles Webb house in St Kilda, was demolished. Its subdivision formed Eildon Court and extended Eildon Road up to Grey Street.

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