25

Fenagh Cottage
7 Burnett Street, St Kilda

Miles Lewis observed that John Butler Cooper, writing in 1930, recorded "a surprising large number of prefabricated iron or timber buildings surviving in St Kilda then. Fifty years later, Lewis found that of these, only Fenagh Cottage had survived. In suburbs nearer to the city, such as South Melbourne, North Melbourne and Fitzroy, redevelopment had not been as intense; far fewer blocks of flats had emerged in the 1930s and 40s and a few small, prefabricated houses had survived.
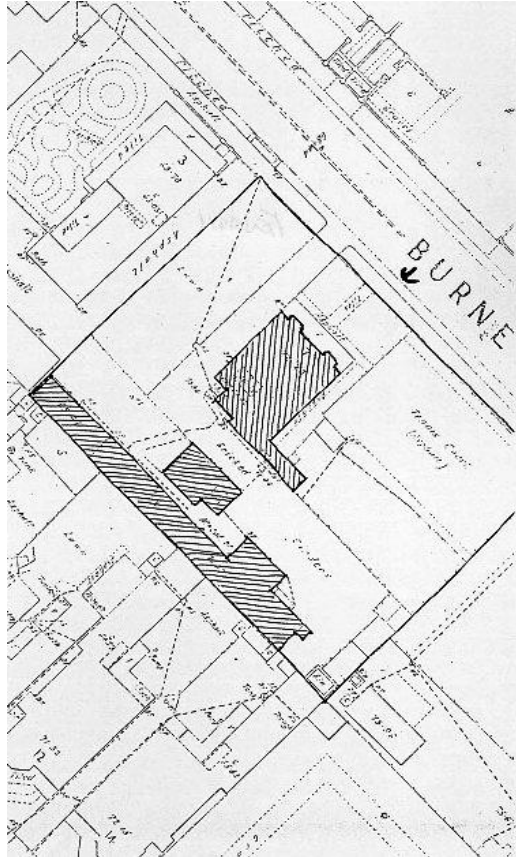

Fenagh Cottage, 2002

Fenagh stands on part of Crown Allotment 25, bought from the Crown by F.G. Dalgety (**23**) in 1846 for £90, part of a much larger estate known as Dalgety's Paddock. Dalgety subdivided this in 1854 and returned to England. The three acres (1.2 hectares) of lots 39 and 40 were bought by Henry Langlands for £612/10/-. Langlands (1794-1863) iron founder and politician who opposed slavery in England and fought for the emancipation of Catholics, was (confusingly) actually a Presbyterian, who became a Baptist. He arrived at

Port Philip in 1847 and with another Scot, Thomas Fulton, founded the first foundry here, four years later. The high quality of its castings brought success and by the early 1860s, he was one of the largest employers in the colony. Later Sir Frederick Sargood of Rippon Lea just pipped him for a seat in the Legislative Council.

But Langlands, who lived in a substantial house at Jolimont, and owned much other property in the colony, sold the following year at a tidy profit to William (or Patrick?) Cleary, for £1,500. By 1855, James Kearney's map shows a cluster of small buildings at 7 Burnett Street. The earliest St Kilda ratebook, in 1857 lists a seven - roomed timber house and stables there, of net annual value £200, owned by Patrick Cleary and occupied by 'George Watson and buildings now erected standing'. A newspaper dated 28 October 1857, has been discovered in the roof of the former coach-house, behind the house.

By 1858 the property's value had fallen and Watson purchased it for a tidy £1,000. He also bought lots 37 and 38 adjacent for £600 from David Guthrie who had also purchased from Dalgety for £520. In property speculation, timing is crucial.

Fenagh Cottage: MMBW Detail Plan, 1897

But at 7 Burnett Street, Watson was not an investor and lived there for the rest of his life: indeed, his family was still there in the 1920s. It was probably he who erected the house on land he then leased, (or Cleary may have imported the house for Watson), 'brought in sections' from England, according to Cooper. In the years immediately following the Gold Rush of 1851, when all able-bodied men had deserted to the Goldfields, labour and finished materials was scarce and expensive, prefabricated buildings were a cheaper option. But in the early 1850s, Watson was looking beyond St Kilda and investing in fast public transport contracts.

George John Watson (1829-1906) was born in the tiny village of Ballydarton, County Carlow in the south-east of Ireland, son of a master of the Carlow foxhounds. Fenagh is a village in County Leitrim, Ireland, north-east of Carrick on Shannon. This is 200 km north of County Carlow, and Watson's connection with it is not known.

Arriving at Melbourne in 1850, the next year he leased Kirk's Bazaar in Bourke Street, the leading horse saleyard in the colony, a lucrative business and meeting-place for sportsmen. By 1857, with an American Cyrus Hewitt, he won the Royal Mail contracts between Melbourne and both Ballarat and Sandhurst (Bendigo) and later acquired Cobb & Co's coach lines to carry them. Later that year they secured the Beechworth mail contract, which gave them a government subsidy of £10,000 a year.

As the boom of the gold rush subsided, no coaching contractor could operate profitably without the support of a government mail contract: the post effectively subsidised public transport. It must have been more profitable for Watson and Hewitt to sell their Cobb & Co services to buy the subsidised Beechworth service, even though its population was not increasing at the rate of Ballarat and Bendigo.

Mr George Watson

In 1857-58, Watson and Hewitt's Beechworth run was managed by a young American, James Rutherford who reduced the Melbourne to Beechworth time to a consistent 26 hours. From 1861-1911, Rutherford went on to control Cobb & Co, expanding it to South Australia, and throughout New South Wales and Queensland, during its most successful years.

Cobb & Co's previous owners were Canadians A.W. Robertson and John Wagner. Watson left the partnership with Hewitt in 1862, but remained in the coaching business and was a partner in Robertson & Co until 1880. That management of coaching companies was so personal is exemplified by Watson's famous feat in 1868, of driving one of the Beechworth coaches to Melbourne in only 15 hours including a 'far from hasty' meal at Avenal.

Watson and Hewitt bred, trained and rested numerous horses on properties they leased until 1862 in the Riverina, the Darling and near Pakenham, where he owned almost 2,000 hectares over 1872-84.

Watson was a member of the committee of the Victoria Racing Club when it was founded in 1864. He remained an owner of racehorses, a VRC starter and committee member into his old age. He was a spectacular cross-country and steeplechase rider and wearing his colours of red and black, his horse won the first Oaks Stakes in 1861 and the Derby in 1860. His colourful language and discipline won him international fame as starter for the Melbourne Cup.

But he is perhaps most famous as founder of the Melbourne Hunt Club in 1853, two years before he moved to Burnett Street. The club was also the setting for the daring exploits of Augusta Gurner, the 'Lady in Grey' (**26**). Watson returned to his Irish roots and purchased several pairs from the famous Carlow hounds. With the best of local hands also acquired, he created the best hounds pack in the colony. He remained master of the Melbourne Hunt Club, as they chased kangaroo, emus and later red deer supplied by Thomas Chirnside of Werribee Park.

Fenagh Cottage resounded to Watson's hunting horn, as Heather Roland describes: 'at many a before-daylight hunt riders would come hurrying (to Burnett Street) through the bush from all quarters'. Watson's hounds were kennelled at Kirk's Bazaar in Bourke Street and Watson lived in a cottage behind the Bazaar, in Little Bourke Street. In 1859, new kennels were built in more rural Alma Road, East St Kilda, between Alexander Street and Lansdowne Road, back to Inkerman Street, on 1.8 hectares.

Hunters included: Adam Lindsay Gordon, W.F. Stawell, (later Chief Justice), (later Sir) John Madden (**29**), Mars Buckley (owner of Buckley and Nunn's Department Store) and Henry Creswick. All nine Watson sons and his daughter Blanche were fine horse riders. The sons were known for their wildness. It is difficult to imagine this family of 12 shoe-horning into the tiny four bedrooms of Fenagh Cottage.

Watson was accustomed to give orders and have them obeyed. 'In the hunting field', Heather Roland recounts, 'one young man daring to give advice…was shown the error of his ways with the lash of the Master's hunting whip'. In 1895, his son Godfrey became deputy Master when at 66, Watson retired from active hunting. Several painted and photographic portraits of Watson depict him hunting costume with whip and horn. Fox hunting is still a popular sport in Victoria. There are thirteen clubs here, more than in any other state. The hunting season runs from May to September.

Watson died at Fenagh Cottage and is buried in St Kilda Cemetery.

The MMBW plan of 1897 depicts the modest estate of Fenagh cottage: a croquet lawn at left and asphalt tennis court at right. A vehicular entry at left led to the coach-house, behind the house, with extensive stables lining the rear boundary, leading to a cinders-surfaced mounting yard. The stables and tennis court have gone, but the c1857 coach-house and another small early building remain. The Morewood and Rodgers galvanised roof tiles existed until recently. (They still exist at Wattle House (**23**) and Berkley Hall's stables (**26**)), but timber shingles beneath do survive. Some walls are lined with packing-cases and the timber framing is early. The verandah and most internal linings are not old. Alterations and repairs were made in 1973 and others were funded by Heritage Victoria in 1987.

William.H.Watson lived at Fenagh Cottage until the 1920s.

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