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Berkley Hall 11 Princes Street, St Kilda

Henry Field Gurner (1819-83) was an Australian, born in Sydney. On leaving school in 1834 he became a clerk to his father, a judge of the Supreme Court, worked for the Crown Solicitor and in 1841, was admitted as an attorney, solicitor and proctor in the Colony of New South Wales. His first position was Deputy-Registrar and Clerk of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, for the Port Philip District and so in May 1841, Gurner was the first attorney, solicitor and proctor admitted to the Bar in the six year old town of Melbourne. By January 1842, he became Clerk of the Peace and Crown Solicitor for the Colony of Port Phillip. He briefly acted as the first Town Clerk (chief executive officer) of the newly incorporated Town of Melbourne, in 1842. He remained Crown Solicitor of Victoria from its separation in 1851 until he retired in 1880.

Gurner was a great Australian patriot and developed a valuable collection of Australiana. As well as two legal textbooks, in 1876, he also wrote a *Chronicle of Port Philip now the Colony of Victoria from 1770 to 1840*. He was a member of the Melbourne Club from 1844 and its president in 1870. He married Augusta Mary Curr (1829-1917), a gentlewoman, the second daughter of Edward Curr, landowner, squatter, politician and 'controversialist'. Curr was one of very few Catholic gentlemen in the District of Port Philip, although both his daughters married Protestants. He was one of the nominated six members of the first Legislative Council of Van Diemens Land in 1825, on its separation from New South Wales. As his family grew (nine sons and six daughters) he settled in Victoria in 1841, where he built the house St Helliers on the Yarra at Abbotsford, the next year. Georgina McCrae describes the Currs as her neighbours in February 1842.

Augusta Gurner was a fine horsewoman, known famously as the 'Lady in Grey'; a skilled huntress who cleared three and four-railed fences on her horse 'Major' in the tradition of Diana, the ancient wood-goddess. In Melbourne she was the only woman to ride the hunt with the Melbourne Hounds (25).

Of their eight surviving children, Henry Edward and John Augustus were barristers, and the latter became Crown Prosecutor in Victoria. The Gurners first lived in a two-storied house and a villa with a garden on the corner of William and Little Collins Street, today bounded at the rear by Gurners Lane. Ironically, in relation to Gurner's Melbourne Club connection, these houses were demolished to build the Australian Club on the site in 1879. A syndicate of Australian Club members was formed and their horse 'Gurners Lane' won both the Melbourne and Caulfield Cups in 1982. The name continues to be used by interests associated with The Australian Club.

Gurner bought land at the second sale of Crown Land at St Kilda. This was sections 27 and 28, giving him an 183 metre frontage to Grey Street. (F.G. Dalgety bought the adjacent similar blocks). In 1850, Gurner bought the adjacent block to the east, obtaining a similar frontage to Princes Street. (So did Dalgety, who also acquired a frontage to Barkly Street, later the site of Oberwyl, (27)). Gurner named the street put through his land Dalgety Street, and Dalgety named Gurner Street, penetrating his property. The land had been previously settled. The Black Plan of 1854 shows existing buildings on the site which were demolished to build Berkley Hall.

In 1854, the year of the Eureka Stockade, Gurner built his house on top of the hill, facing Princes Street. It had a view over Hobson's Bay. The architect was Albert Purchas. Later Purchas designed St George's Presbyterian Church, in Chapel Street, St Kilda (1877-80), his firm, Purchas and Teague, designed the Wool Exchange, 120 - 138 King Street, in 1913-14, and over 140 houses, offices, churches and cemetery buildings in Victoria between 1852 and 1909. 11 Princes Street is one of his first buildings. It was built in a sequence of stages.

It was a large four-square Classical house, with a verandah on three sides, but quite close to Princes Street. It had four reception rooms, four bedrooms, store, pantries, larders, strongroom, brick stables, two coach houses and harness room, by 1917. It is known to have had difficulty in persuading the Yan Yean water supply to climb the hill, excepting only 'a trickle between one and five am'.

Beauties of Victoria, a tourist booklet, evokes the scene: 'Nearly on the highest part of the hill of St Kilda, stands this gentlemen's spacious suburban residence, ... From the lofty verandah a fine view of the adjoining park of St Kilda, with the blue hills in the distance over-topping many a beautiful residence is obtained.' Frederick Revans Chapman, who lived in St Kilda from 1855 - 64, wrote in a letter: '... on the west side (of Princes Street) was Mr Gunner with a high fence to protect his front garden'.

After Gurner's death, Mrs H. F. Gurner was given as occupant of Berkeley Hall. It is unclear to whom this refers. Not Augusta, she was off abroad. By 1892, 'John A. Gurner' is given as occupant, that is, Gurner's barrister son, John Augustus. By 1900, Augusta was ensconced back in residence, after her extended travels abroad. There was still no house built between Burnett Street and Dalgety Street. The redoubtable Augusta died in 1917.

The front rooms, and double-storied verandah were built after 1873, (they are not shown on the Vardy Plan of that year), but before the additions of 1897.

By 1897, the MMBW plan shows Berkley Hall bounded by Dalgety Lane, with a large garden facing Dalgety Street, from which steps approach the side verandah. There is also a garden on the south side, facing Princes Street. At the rear of the house are two large wings with a courtyard between. The colonnaded verandah with Doric and Ionic column-pairs,

with balconettes between at first floor level, is rather coarsely detailed and obscures the facades.

Technically interesting are the rare Morewood and Rogers galvanised iron roof tiles surviving on the stables. Wattle House (23) also has them and they were only recently removed from Fenagh Cottage stables (25).

During a brief recall as Crown Solicitor, Gurner died, at the Melbourne Club. He left an estate £61,000. Augusta lived on for another 34 years, filling her widowhood with extensive travel. When she died in 1917, the house was auctioned. By then the property had reduced to 65.5 x 56.4 metres. It was bought by Mr and Mrs Balwin and when he died, Mr Gosling sold it to Mrs D.L. Speed in 1945, who named it Berkley Hall. It was converted to reception rooms, leaving only the drawing room relatively as the Gurners would have remembered it. In November 1999 it was auctioned for over \$1.5million. After the Wattle House (23) and Eildon (as Barham House (24)), Berkley Hall is the third oldest surviving substantial house in St Kilda.

Berkley Hall is now offices for Abercrombie and Kent (Australia) Pty. Ltd.), 'Simply the best way to travel'.

Note: A proctor is a person managing cases in a civil court.

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