

# 39

## **Elsternwick Hotel 259 Brighton Road (Cnr 173 Glen Huntly Road), Elwood**



Elsternwick Hotel, 2004

Beyond the St Kilda Hill, travelling south on the Arthur's Seat Road, as the track to Point Nepean was then known, the next rising ground around the bay is Elwood. From the 1840s, Brighton Road kept to this high ground east of the Elwood swamp, rather than follow the coast. Glen Huntly Road formed the southern municipal boundary of St Kilda. Coaching inns were dispersed along the Brighton Road and two survive: the Grosvenor at 10 Brighton Road opened in part of its present building in 1860, the other is the Elsternwick.

Elsternwick Hotel, the earliest (central) part likely to have been built in 1854 or 1855, is one of the earliest in suburban Melbourne. The oldest hotel continuously operating in its

original building in Victoria is the Old England in Heidelberg, the earliest part of which was built in 1848 and also formerly a coaching inn.

It is thought that the designer of the earliest section of Elsternwick Hotel was Robert Russell (1808-1900). Certainly a copy of a design drawing of this hotel by Russell done in 1875, is held by the hotel. In Russell's drawing, the hotel stands isolated in remnant bush with a swampy foreground. It is two-storied with three bays and a hipped roof in a Colonial Regency manner and interesting to compare to the earliest section of the Grosvenor (two-storied, four bays and a splayed corner, with cornice and parapet) which is slightly grander for its later date.

Melbourne's other earliest architects with Russell, were Samuel Jackson (1807-76) whose own house, Wattle House, (1850, **23**) survives in Jackson Street, St Kilda and John Gill (c1797-1866) whose Barham House is concealed within Eildon (**24**).

Russell's firm Russell, Watts and Pritchard, were architects of Elwood House, 28, 30 & 30A Vautier Street, Elwood (**40**) in the same year as the hotel, 1854. Russell is a puzzle for historians. Before arriving in Sydney in 1833 at the age of 25, Russell had worked in three important architectural offices in Britain including that of John Nash who was architect to George IV, working on Buckingham Palace (1832-33). Russell also brought experience in surveying, gained in Ireland in 1835. He moved to Melbourne on 29 September 1836 only a year after Jackson.

Russell was posted here as senior Assistant Surveyor. He carried out a topographic survey of the site of Melbourne and its existing buildings with two assistants. It is unclear if he actually drew the plan, but the detailed layout was designed by Robert Hoddle, the more senior surveyor who succeeded him in March 1837, when Governor Bourke arrived and found him 'dilatatory'. Architectural historian, George Tibbits considers Russell casual and a failure as a surveyor and he returned to Sydney. He was dismissed in June 1837. But he returned as Clerk of Works in March 1838 only to be dismissed again in June 1839. Hoddle died worth £500,000.00: Russell died on a government pension.

In private practice, Russell surveyed Port Albert and Wilson's Promontory, (1843) designed the first Bank of Australasia in Melbourne (1840-41) and his best known building, St James Old Cathedral, 419-435 King Street (1839-41) the earliest Anglican Church in Victoria. The design is influenced by the work of Francis Greenway in Sydney. Here Russell was succeeded (failed again?) by Charles Laing (1841), as he and Jackson were again for their design of the first Princes Bridge (1844). The partnership of Russell and Thomas designed 45 buildings over 1849-52, Russell & Wills (1853-54), Russell Wills & Pritchard (1854-55) including Elwood House. Between 1852 and 1888 Russell designed 41 houses, churches and commercial buildings alone. As a member of polite society, he was a foundation member of the Melbourne Club in 1838.

In 1856, Russell and his family returned to England for four years. His watercolour views leave the clearest indication of what early Melbourne was like. He wrote poetry and a

novel. The RHSV holds a photograph of him (c. 1855) when he was completing the Elsternwick Hotel. It shows an intense, drawn 47 year old, with high brow and cheekbones and sensitive features. He died just before Queen Victoria, at the age of 92.

Thomas McCombie, journalist, merchant and politician and Robert Keys were granted the land on which the Elsternwick Hotel was built in July 1854, for £346. 1854 is on the parapet over the corner. McCombie wrote the 'now forgotten' novel *Arabin*, the first to describe the settlement at Port Phillip, in 1845. He owned the *Port Phillip Gazette* newspaper, Melbourne's first newspaper, founded by John Pascoe Fawkner. His observations of Melbourne society and the squatters' life are astute and a frequent source for Paul de Serville's seminal *Port Phillip Gentlemen and Good Society in Melbourne before the Gold Rushes*.

John Fleming was McCombie and Keys' first licensee. In 1858, McCombie bought Key's share when the second licensee became Henry Figsby Young (Senior) (9). Young, was the father of (and of the same name as) Henry Figsby Young, Junior who was the Young of Young and Jackson's Hotel on the corner of Swanston and Flinders Street. In 1866, the Elsternwick was known, rather literally, as the Beer House Hotel.

In 1869 McCombie died and it is mischievous to speculate that Young may have relaxed his management practices: in 1871 he was fine 40 shillings for Sunday trading, during the Christmas rush, it was reported in the *Argus* newspaper. This did not deter Young from buying the hotel from Mc Combie's estate in 1872, three years before his son took on the licence for Young & Jackson's, and held it at least until the mid 1890s. In 1878, he installed Chas Beasley as licensee and in rapid succession, A.G.M. Burden (1882), Charles Cannon (1883-89), Andrew Oastler (1890-91) and L. Oastler (1895).

In 1881, Young added six rooms to the Elsternwick and in 1890-91 he built the elaborate Boom style corner section, probably also the rear single-storied billiards room, with its splendid timber-framed roof and the arcaded facade to the earliest section. The architects for these late nineteenth century works are not known. In 1926, Chris A. Cowper, Murphy & Applesford were architects for major internal alterations and in 1930, P.J. O'Connor designed further works. In 1934, the billiard room was extended northwards in historicist style, as a bottle shop on Brighton Road.

In 1938, Robert H. McIntyre, prolific hotel architect, designed alterations and additions to the hotel. McIntyre was the father of Peter McIntyre, Emeritus Professor of Architecture at the University of Melbourne: an important and innovative Modernist architect from the mid-1950s. Robert had just completed rebuilding the Prince of Wales Hotel at 29 Fitzroy Street (16), the year before, in a stylish Streamlined Moderne manner. Presumably his work at the Elsternwick may have been similar, but none is visible now. In 1972, the hotel was again extensively renovated and extended: Carlton & United Breweries had bought the hotel.

**Note:** Neither the National Trust, nor Heritage Victoria hold files on this building. It is not classified, nor registered.

### References

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