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Elwood House 28, 30 & 30A Vautier Street, Elwood



30A Vautier Street, Elwood, 2004

Terraced houses are the quintessentially Melbourne building type of the mid - Nineteenth Century. The earliest are in Fitzroy and St Kilda. Elwood House, built as two terraced houses for investment in 1854-55, is the third earliest terrace surviving in Melbourne.

The earliest surviving terrace is the first stage of Glass Terrace, 72-74 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy (1853-54). Next is Royal Terrace, 50-68 Nicholson Street (cnr Gertrude Street, 1853-58). 5 Upper Esplanade was built in 1855, Eden Terrace, 4-18 Dalgety Street, St Kilda (1855-57), 24 Princes Street St Kilda (1856), Glass Terrace second stage at 68, 70, 76 & 78 Gertrude Street (1856) and 39-49 Brunswick Street (1857-58).

It is a tightly bunched field, but worth setting out in detail, to clarify how important were the terraces in St Kilda. Of all these, certainly Elwood House is the furthest from the city. It is also the earliest house in Elwood. It was separated from the St Kilda Hill, by the Elwood swamp and must have appeared so incongruous standing sentinel-like, anticipating the dense resort development that never came to Elwood.

The Reverend Joseph Docker (1793-1865) was born at Newby Head, Cumbria in England. After working as an assistant curate, Docker married and immigrated to Sydney in 1828. He became rector of St Mathew's, Windsor for five years, but gave it away to farm a local estate he had bought. Encouraged by Major Mitchell's account, he decided to move to the Port Philip District. The family travelled in covered bullock-wagons, crossing the Murray at Crossing-Place (Albury) in 1838.

He obtained the squatting rights of a run the Aborigines called Bontharambo (on the Ovens River, near Wangaratta). It had been deserted by its owner whose shepherds had been murdered by Aborigines. Docker's sympathetic approach to these people was rewarded with their friendship and support. They continued to hold corroborees near to his house. He prospered and built the present large granite house Bontharambo, on the same site in 1864. He built his Melbourne house in Richmond. There are Docker Streets both in Richmond and Elwood.

For investment in 1853, Docker bought eleven allotments, of land in North Elwood (now Elwood), from the Crown Grantee J.G. Vautier within the Elwood Hill Estate, which was a subdivision of Crown Allotments 12 and 13, now bounded by Beach Avenue, Ormond Road, and South Elwood (now Docker) Street and Ormond Road, facing the St Kilda to Brighton Track (now the bike track) and Ormond (now Elwood) Beach.

So Elwood had already been named in 1853: Docker named his house after the subdivision from which he bought. It is said that Elwood is named after the early Quaker historian and poet, Thomas Ellwood (1639-1713). He was a friend of William Penn, after whom Pennsylvania is named and reader to the blind Milton. He was imprisoned for his religious beliefs. His *A Collection of Poems on Various Subjects* was published in 1710. Presumably the street names of 'Poet's Corner' (Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Dryden, Browning, Ruskin, Milton, Addison, Cowper, Spenser, Thackeray, Southey, Gordon, Lindsay, Byron, Goldsmith, Scott, Shelley, Rosetti, Keats, Meredith, Coleridge, Burns, and Dickens, etc) ensued.

The land had been surveyed by Robert Hoddle in 1850. Docker paid £3,525. Three of Docker's 11 allotments (11,12 and 13) were in North Elwood Road (now Vautier Street). In 1854 he commissioned Russell, Watts and Pritchard, architects to design eight terraced houses. Of these only two were built, a pavilion pair at the west end of the proposed terrace.

The Russell is the Robert Russell (1808-1902), one of the three earliest architects in Melbourne (**23** and **39**) with Samuel Jackson (1807-76) and John Gill (c1797-1866). Russell was only in partnership with Watts and Pritchard for a year, although 21 buildings

are known by them; and in partnership with Watts alone for the year prior. L. Thomas Watts (1827-1915) is the designer of Elwood House, not Russell. He continued in business with Pritchard for another year after Russell left and from 1856-1906, continued to practice alone. Over that period, he designed some 209 buildings (or as Smith & Watts, 1864-1913 and Thomas Watts & Sons, 1889-1913). Yet he is not a well known architect, other than for his striking Baptist Church, 486 Albert Street, East Melbourne (1859), sadly now only the façade of offices.

Due to the careful retention of the Docker Papers in the State Library, the construction of Elwood House is particularly well documented. A very rare, full specification survives, dated 13 December 1854, and five sheets of architectural drawings and the complete correspondence between architect and client.

‘We are sorry to say that the works are proceeding very slowly...we will make every endeavour to push the building along’ (10 April 1855). By 24 April: ‘the works are proceeding with greater dispatch. One of our firm will be on the building this afternoon; when we hope to see the roof on...it would now be desirable to try to let the houses’. However, (on 3 September 1855) ‘...We are urging on the contractors and hope to see them complete by the time you intend living in Melbourne...We hope that when you come to inspect the buildings yourself, you will find they are built to your satisfaction. Our desire is that they should be of a permanent character and not be of so ephemeral a nature as to last only five or 24 (?) years’. Anderson Lamb & Bonham were the builders and the cost was £2,000.

The builder may have failed, because Watts and Pritchard (Russell having departed) called tenders again on 27 October 1855 for ‘completing two houses in North Elwood’. Floor plans in the Docker Papers show mirrored plans behind the good Late Renaissance façade. The halls are next to the party wall, allowing windows to all rooms. The front parlour was followed by a bedroom, then pantry, kitchen and scullery. Upstairs, the front drawing room opened onto the balcony, then another bedroom, bathroom, a third (small) bedroom and servants’ bedroom. In the rear yard each had a wc, coach-house, stables with groom’s rooms and loft above and an underground water tank. By November the first tenants were secured on £200 per year leases.

Rev. Docker died in 1865, the year after Bontharambo was completed and his son, Frederick George Docker sold Elwood House in August 1871 to John George Dougharty (1823-89), a stock and station agent and MLC (1880-88), for £800. In 1874, Dougharty proceeded to combine the two terraces into one large, 20-roomed house. He added a single storey wing on the south side, (which was demolished around 1935), added various outbuildings and the canted bay window to the front of no. 30. The 1906 MMBW plan shows a cellar to no. 30A, hedges, a summerhouse and conservatory.

A notice survives for an auction of this and ‘Seaview House’ dated 16 January 1874. Either this did not proceed, or it may refer to another house, since Elwood House is

described as Gothic(!) In any case, Elwood House was not sold then. A watercolour of the house, possibly at about this period is held by the Port Phillip City Collection.

In the 1880s, North Elwood residents were in the delicious position of not having to pay rates, since they were outside the area of St Kilda Road Board, and of the Boroughs of St Kilda and Brighton.

In 1917-18, the Dougharty family and its purportedly aristocratic French branch the Huons, converted Elwood house into five flats. In 1923 it was sold to James Griffith of Brighton. Land to the south and north was subdivided and sold for suburban houses with the loss of garden and outbuildings.

In 1971, the stables (no 28) were let on a 99 year lease and an outbuilding known as the 'men's quarters' was demolished to enable sufficient car parking. In 1978, Elwood House was returned to being two terraced houses, no. 30 and 30A. In 1998, two large double-storied, semi-detached units were proposed for the backyards of Elwood House.

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