

# 47

## **Former Gas Valve House 617 St Kilda Road, Melbourne**

After a shopkeeper established his own private gas supply, the first in Melbourne, in 1850, the City of Melbourne Gas and Coke Company was established. But it took six years before gas first illuminated buildings in Melbourne. By 1873, it had two competitor companies, each with its own trenches for gas lines. In 1878 they amalgamated to form the Melbourne Gas Company. In 1885, sadly, the MGC saw fit to destroy all of its records.

By the peak of gas usage, in 1892, when electricity began to replace gas lighting, 50 gas works had been constructed in Victoria, but many Victorian homes relied on gas lighting through the 1930s and 1940s. Finally in 1950, the private gas industry was replaced by the Gas and Fuel Corporation of Victoria. Its objective was to replace reliance on New South Wales black coal with a new brown coal plant at Morwell. This was achieved in 1956.

By then, other fuels were emerging. Two large oil refineries opened near Melbourne. Then, in 1965, natural gas was discovered off the Victorian coast near Sale. By the end of 1970, over a million gas appliances had been converted to natural gas and the four metropolitan gas production plants and their thousand employees made redundant. Natural gas pipelines spread across the state.

In 1973, with the purchase of Colonial Gas, the Gas & Fuel Corporation became the monopoly gas supplier in Victoria. So, from 1970, the various giant gasholder cylinders around Melbourne: at Tooronga, North Fitzroy, Essendon, Sandringham, Newport, Preston, Highett, Collingwood, Williamstown, Brighton, Footscray, Dandenong, Mentone and Heidelberg were all demolished. By the 1980s, the only physical evidence of the Melbourne's extensive coal gas industry was a Regulating House in Macaulay Road, North Melbourne (still operating, but to close soon), the South Melbourne Gasworks buildings, Pickles Street, Albert Park (now Gasworks Arts Park and the Gasworks Theatre) and this former gas valve house (1877), in St Kilda Road.

In July 1857, E.G. Fitzgibbon, Town Clerk of Melbourne wrote to the City of St Kilda, offering to sell gas lamps and 'pillars', previously used in Melbourne. By June 1858, the City of Melbourne Gas and Coke Company was asking St Kilda Council to nominate which streets had been permanently levelled, so they could lay their gas pipes.

In August 1858, the company advised the City of St Kilda Council that it was preparing to lay mains for supplying gas to the inhabitants of St Kilda and asking for the Council's approval.

In 1858 a local gas company was formed to light the municipalities of St Kilda and Prahran. A line would be taken up over Punt Road Hill to Prahran, Windsor and on to St Kilda. Albert Park was suggested as the site for gasworks. Shares were issued, but fortunately for Albert Park this time, nothing came of the project.

From 1858 to 1871, there were a series of requests to council and negotiations with Prahran Council, for street gas lamps in Wellington Street, and at the corners of Wellington and Milton Streets, Fitzroy and Barkly Streets and Barkly and Gurner Streets.

In September 1859 the City of Melbourne Gas and Coke Co agreed to light 28 street lamps by gas, 'and (provide) such additional lamps as may be erected from time to time'. This was the first street lighting in St Kilda. In 1860, the City of Melbourne Gas and Coke Company laid a main over Princes Bridge to St Kilda Railway Station, so houses on the new blocks in St Kilda Road, first subdivided in 1859, could be lit by gas.

From 1858 to 1871, there were a series of requests and negotiations with Prahran Council for gas lamps in Wellington Street, at the corner of Wellington and Chapel Streets, Wellington and Dandenong Roads as well as Tennyson, Dickens and Milton Streets, Fitzroy and Barkly Streets and Barkly and Gurner Streets. The company was fined whenever the supply failed, even when due to floods.

In October 1875, St Kilda Council received a Report of Committees appointed by Prahran and St Kilda Councils 'to consider the advisability of establishing a joint municipal gas works. In November, Council received a legal opinion from the famous George Higginbotham, whose statue stands outside the Treasury in Spring Street, which Council had the power to: 'make and sell gas for supply to public lamps and places and to the general public'. By August 1876, Council was dissatisfied with the C of MG & CC's gas supply for street lighting. Yet, in October, a poll of ratepayers rejected a proposal for Council to take over the supply.

In 1876, the councils of Prahran, South Melbourne and St Kilda resolved to join to erect gasworks, but a poll of ratepayers under pressure from the C of MG & CC rejected the idea.

In 1886, the company paid £15,000 to remove another proposed competitor, the South Suburban Gas Company. Local attempts to produce and reticulate gas had been quashed and despite dissatisfaction with the C of MG & CC's supply, it managed to neutralise all its potential competitors.

This site at 617 St Kilda Road was granted by the Crown in 1865. In 1876, Thomas Mowbray acquired the land as Trustee of the City of Melbourne Gas and Coke Company. No gas was ever produced there; it was always used as a holding or regulating out-station for gas distribution. Over the next year, a gasholder and valving equipment were installed. In 1878, another gasholder, engine house and a seven-roomed brick house were added. Gas came from South Melbourne and there were problems with the flow, until a large (600-900mm diameter) main was installed. It adjoined Jewish Almshouses (now demolished,

but designed by George Johnson, (43)), which were on the corner of Union Road, from 1870.



Former Gas Valve House, 2002

By 1912, the gasholders were removed; gas for St Kilda being both made and stored at the South Melbourne Gasworks. When natural gas was introduced, the valve equipment was replaced to suit.

With the recent redevelopment of the site as a major office building, all of the gas industry buildings have been demolished, except the valve house. This was probably built in 1881 (although it possibly began as the 1878 engine house). The architect is not known. It is a well-proportioned and finely detailed red brick and stucco Classical pavilion, worthy architecturally of its place amongst the great houses and public buildings of St Kilda Road. The Metropolitan Gas Company's relief insignia on the pediments, is particularly delicate. It is possibly the first of its type of valve house as well as the last to survive in Melbourne. Its designer is not known.

Gas was the first form of reticulated power supply in St Kilda, preceding electricity by some 40 years. So this modest, prim, classical building is the only surviving physical evidence of the first reticulated power in St Kilda and Prahran.

## References

Buckrich, Judith Raphael. *Melbourne's Grand Boulevard. The Story of St Kilda Road*. State Library of Victoria. Melbourne 1996. pp 41, 46, 47 & 48.

Heritage Victoria. Victorian Heritage Register. No: H 675.

Keating, John D.,. *The Lambent Flame*. Melbourne University Press. Melbourne 1974.

National Trust of Australia (Victoria). File No: 4602.

Proudle, Ray y. *Circle of Influence. A History of the Gas Industry in Victoria*. Margren Publishing with the Gas and Fuel Corporation of Victoria. Melbourne 1987. pp 4-8, 44, 47, 48 & 359.