

Esplanade Hotel, formerly New Bath and Criterion 1856 -
11 The Esplanade, St Kilda
MEL: 57 K10



Esplanade Hotel, 1881

One of the most instantly identifiable and iconic St Kilda landmarks, today's Esplanade Hotel, the 'Espy', began life as the genteel New Bath Hotel in 1856, constructed on site for James Stewart Johnston, a colourful figure in Melbourne at the time, both as a hotelier and part-owner of the *Argus* newspaper. The New Bath Hotel was demolished in the 1860s.



The Esplanade with the Esplanade Hotel at right, 1890

The new building, completed in 1878, and altered in 1921, was designed by Smith & Johnson (best known for designing Melbourne's Law Courts) in a conservative Italianate style that is nevertheless grandly conceived in a manner that befits its imposing position on the Esplanade. Both its geographical location and the historical moment from which it emerged; the Esplanade was one of the largest and most prominent 19th century resort hotels in

Victoria – ensuring the influence of resort architecture in 19th century Britain, especially Brighton.

Whilst it does not appear that Johnston ran the New Bath himself, he leased it to a succession of licensees, the first being William Henry Johnson. In an advertisement in the *Argus*, possibly dating back to the late 1850s, Johnson noted the proximity to St Kilda beach the new bathing establishment, and the proposed jetty. Yet it was his successor, Charles Wedel, who took over in 1861 and first recognised the potential of the hotel making considerable effort to capitalise on its entertainment and tourism potential by introducing string music, thus consolidating the hotel's historic role as one of the country's premiere live music venues. Wedel also changed the name of the hotel to the Criterion, named for his Criterion Hotel in Collins Street. In 1864-5, Johnston sold the hotel to solicitor Charles Duerdin. Ten years later, the site was sold to James Orkney who, in 1877, commissioned prominent Melbourne architects Smith and Johnston to construct a row of terrace houses, yet was persuaded to change his plans and erect a large hotel instead.

The Esplanade Hotel was opened in January 1878 to cater to its residents, passing trade, tourists and holidaymakers. Philanthropist Alfred Felton was amongst those who took up residency at the hotel from 1892 until his death in 1904. Felton's generous bequest enabled many art works to be purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria. The hotel was the permanent home for 30 to 80 people right up until the 1950s, and reputedly hosted celebrities such as Mark Twain and Sarah Bernhardt.



View of Esplanade Hotel from the St Kilda Pier, pre-1914 postcard

The arrival of Thomas Symington Carlyon in 1920 heralded a series of major changes to the hotel, including substantial architectural renovation that was clearly American influenced. (A big sign 'Carlyon's Hotel Esplanade' was painted at the front; another sign advertising his taxi service 'Carlyon's Taxis' can still be seen

painted on the brickwork today.) Carlyon's musical tastes were also influenced by the United States, and during his reign, the hotel became a premier jazz venue. During the 30s and 40s, big bands provided weekly entertainment; this musical tradition was continued with jazz and be-bop in the 1950s and 1960s, and disco in the 1970s. In the early 1980s, blues and country acts took centre stage, while new local talent was continually being exposed to large audiences.



Esplanade Hotel, 2004

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