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**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 and the other is the Elsternwick.

The date 1854 is embossed on the parapet over its splayed corner and the central part of the Elsternwick Hotel is indeed likely to have been built in 1854 or 1855. So the Elsternwick is the oldest continuously trading hotel building in St Kilda and probably in all of inner Melbourne, now that the Duke of Wellington in 148 Flinders Street (cnr Russell Street), whose 1850 building was licensed in 1853, has closed. The oldest hotel continuously operating in its original building in Victoria is the Old England in Heidelberg, the earliest single-storied part of which was built in 1848 and it was also formerly a coaching inn.

The Elsternwick Hotel was said to have been notorious haven for criminals, and Becky Aizen relates that even Tommy Bent, not always on the right side of the law himself, was once held up and tied to a Red Gum opposite the hotel.

It is thought that the designer of the earliest section of Elsternwick Hotel was Robert Russell (1808-1900, **40**). Certainly the hotel holds a copy of a drawing done later by Russell depicting it in 1875. In Russell's drawing, even then 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 is interesting to compare with the earliest section of the Grosvenor, which was two-storied, with four bays and a splayed corner, with a cornice and parapet, in fact slightly grander for its later late.

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

Russell's firm, Russell, Watts and Pritchard, was the architect of Elwood House (**40**) at 28, 30 & 30A Vautier Street, Elwood in 1854 the same year as the hotel. Russell is a puzzle for historians, because he seems to have failed to live up to his early promise. Before arriving in Sydney in 1833 at the age of 25, he had worked in three important architectural offices in Britain including that of John Nash who was architect to George IV. Russell is said to have worked on the design of Buckingham Palace 'in 1832-33,' but the king died in 1830 and Nash, who had been working lavishly on the palace since 1825 for his friend the king, was immediately sacked by his successor William IV and he retired from practice in 1834. Nash was still completing Regent's Park Garden (1832) and Carlton House Terrace and Gardens (1831-33) and Russell may have worked on those. 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 CBD and its existing buildings with two assistants. It is unclear if he actually drew a proposed layout, but Robert Hoddle (1794-1881, **40**), the more senior surveyor from Sydney who succeeded him in March 1837 when Governor Bourke arrived, later designed the detailed layout. Bourke found Russell 'dilatatory' and told Hoddle to remain in Melbourne and take over as Senior Surveyor of future surveys over Robert Russell and his assistants, D'Arcy and Darke.

Whether Hoddle planned Melbourne or used Russell's design is controversial. Russell certainly claimed to have laid out the town before Hoddle arrived. In a detailed study H S McComb concluded that Hoddle designed both Melbourne and Williamstown and drew the first plan of them in his field book, W W Darke assisted him with the site lay-out and Hoddle used Russell's 'feature plan' of the existing settlement as the basis on which he then drew the first plan of Melbourne. Hoddle severely criticized Russell for neglect of duty and George Tibbits architectural historian considers Russell to have been casual and a failure as a surveyor. However, Russell seems to have compensated for this reputation in his subsequent career.

Hoddle returned to Sydney to finalise his affairs and left Russell and Darke to 'survey the Yarra Yarra River, the adjoining branches, and all permanent waters in the neighbourhood.' When Hoddle returned two months later, Russell had only surveyed 13 kilometres of creek, 'which any surveyor could have done in two days.' Russell was recalled to Sydney on 21 October, but returned as Clerk of Works in March 1838, only to be dismissed again in June 1839. Hoddle died worth £500,000, but Russell died on a government pension. This reputation did not prevent the Royal Australian Institute of Architects from naming their previous two Victorian head offices, Robert Russell House.

As a gentleman and a member of polite society, he was a foundation member of the Melbourne Club in 1838. In subsequent private practice, Russell surveyed Port Albert and Wilson's Promontory in 1843, designed the first Bank of Australasia in Melbourne (1840-41) and his best known building, St James' Old Cathedral, 419-435 King Street, cnr Batman Street (1839-41), the earliest Anglican Church in Victoria. Its design is influenced by the work of Francis Greenway (1777-1837) in Sydney. At St James', Russell was succeeded (had he failed again?) by Charles Laing (1809-57) in 1841, as he and Jackson were again to be, for their design of the first Princes Bridge in 1844.

The partnership of Russell & Thomas designed 45 buildings over 1849-52, which was succeeded by Russell & Watts (1853-54) and then Russell, Watts & Pritchard (1854-55), who were responsible for Elwood House. In 1856, Russell left the partnership and his family returned to England for four years, but even so, between 1852 and 1888 Russell alone designed 41 houses, churches and commercial buildings.

Perhaps Robert Russell's most enduring legacy is his watercolour views, which leave the clearest indication of what early Melbourne was like. He also wrote poetry and a novel. The RHSV holds a photograph of him in c1855, whilst he was completing the Elsternwick Hotel. The photograph shows an intense and drawn 47-year old, with a high brow, cheekbones and sensitive features. He died just before Queen Victoria but older, 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 (presumably by him) in July 1854, for £346. McCombie wrote the 'now forgotten' novel *Arabin*, written in 1845, the first to describe the settlement at Port Phillip, he owned Melbourne's first newspaper, the *Port Phillip Gazette*, which had been founded by John Pascoe Fawkner and his observations of Melbourne society and the squatters' life are astute and a frequent source for Paul de Serville's seminal work *Port Philip Gentlemen and Good Society in Melbourne before the Gold Rushes*.

John Fleming was McCombie and Keys' first licensee. In 1858, McCombie bought out Keys' share, and Henry Figsby Young Senior (9) replaced him as second licensee. Young was the father of Henry Figsby Young Junior, who was the Young of Young and Jackson's Hotel, still thriving on the corner of Swanston and Flinders Streets.

By 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 then relaxed his management practices: in 1871 the *Argus* reported that he was fined £2 for Sunday trading during the Christmas rush. This did not deter Young from buying the hotel from McCombie's estate in 1872, three years before his son took on the licence for Young & Jackson's, and he then held it at least until the mid-1890s. In 1878, he installed Chas Beasley as licensee and then in rapid succession: A G M Burden (1882), Charles Cannon (1883-89), Andrew Oastler (1890-91) and L Oastler (1895).

In 1881, Young added the elaborate Boom style splayed corner, with its unusual round angles and six other accommodation rooms in 1890-91. The architect for these works is not known but in 1889, James Wood designed a new front for the 1854 section: and double-storied arcade with a parapet, of which the ground level has now been enclosed; also the splendid rear single-storied billiards room with its splendid timber-framed roof. Then followed a sequence of alterations: in 1926, Chris A Cowper (12), Murphy & Applesford were architects for major internal changes to the hotel, P J O'Connor designed further works in 1930 and in 1934, the billiard room was extended northwards onto Brighton Road in a historicist style as a bottle shop.

In 1938, Robert H McIntyre, prolific hotel architect, designed alterations and additions to the Elsternwick. 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 onward, whose own children are also architects. McIntyre 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 bought by Carlton & United Breweries (now Fosters Brewing Group Limited) and was again extensively renovated and extended.

The neon Victoria Bitter sign specifically included in the Trust's classification, is a rare survival and is similar to one now erected over the QBH Nightclub, which once terminated the Swanston Street vista to the north. The Elsternwick's sign was erected in 1951 and is a local landmark. Whilst earlier neon signs survive, there are relatively few large rooftop neon skysigns remaining. Originally incorporating an outline of white chaser globes, this is possibly the second oldest large neon skysign remaining that included movement, after the PELACO sign in Richmond, erected in 1939.

Note:

There are three dates offered for Russell's arrival in Melbourne: Tibbits gives it as September 1835 with the colonial government's survey team, Lewis gives it as October 1836 with Captain Lonsdale's party, whilst Tibbits and Roenfeldt give 29 September 1836.

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