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## **Figsby & Fareham, 47-49 Robe Street, St Kilda**



Figsby & Fareham, 2004

### **Young, Jackson and Marcus Clarke**

Figsby and Fareham were built in 1867 by their owner/builder, William Allen of St Kilda Hill. Allen was the builder of the first St Kilda Town Hall (33) on the corner of Grey and Barkly Streets in the 1850s that was demolished in the 1930s. Later he built Linden (8) for Moritz Michaelis and his architect Alfred Kürsteiner, in 1870. It is said that they both include some design elements derived from that of the early Town Hall: the Roman Doric ground floor verandah columns and pilasters of the verandah visible in the photograph and the internal stairs.

Fareham was the name first proposed for the municipality of St Kilda, but discarded in favour of the more popular 'St Kilda.' Figsby is named for an early tenant, Henry Figsby Young Junior. He and his business partner, Thomas Joshua Jackson, were born in Dublin and related through their mothers' families. Henry Figsby Young Senior had been the licensee of the Elsternwick Hotel (39) in 1858 and of the Freemasons' Arms Hotel in North Melbourne in 1867. That year, Henry Figsby Young Junior with Jackson, became licensees of Sparrow's Hotel (1864-1967, earlier Rolland's Hotel, and latter the Corner Hotel), 239 Fitzroy Street, corner Barkly Street, St Kilda Junction. It was one of the two hotels demolished to widen the junction in 1973.

The hotel was named for its first licensee, George Sparrow. Whilst he was leaseholder and licensee, on 29 July 1870 Young was fined ten shillings for selling liquor on a Sunday. On 17 January 1874, he was up for the same offence and fined four pounds. In 1875, the partners sold Sparrow's lease and took on the licence of the Prince's Bridge Hotel, on the corner Swanston and Flinders Street, Melbourne. Together, for thirty years they successfully ran the hotel that still famously bears their names.

Marcus Clarke (1846-81) the early journalist and important novelist lived at Fareham and wrote part of his great novel *For the Term of his Natural Life* there. His biographer, Brian Elliott places him with Victor Hugo and Dostoevsky among the great nineteenth-century visionaries who found new insight of human worth in the problems of crime and punishment; especially relevant in convict-founded colonial Australia: and his novel as the one monumental work of fiction from the first century of Australia's history. It was published as a serial from 1870 over two and a half years, whilst Clarke was secretary to the trustees and later sub-librarian at the Melbourne Public Library (State Library of Victoria) from 1870-80. Sir Redmond Barry saw his potential and appointed him, but once admonished him for entering the library in a cabbage-tree hat.

Clarke had emigrated from England aged 18, when an anticipated inheritance from his father evaporated. His play, *The Happy Land*, was the first to be banned in Victoria. Controversially, in November 1879, he wrote in the *Victorian Review* that the advance of science had led to abandoning belief in the miraculous and that Christianity was moribund as an intellectual and moral force. The article provoked Bishop Moorhouse to reply accusing Clarke of atheism. His last word, published in the *Melbourne Review* in April 1880, cleverly exposed the weaknesses in the bishop's argument and scored an intellectual victory. Paul de Serville wryly described Clarke as a 'gentleman bohemian.' He was excitable and mercurial, with malicious and ephemeral wit, a lively mind, a perceptive eye and worked hard. He died aged 35 assisted by alcohol, within six months of Barry who was 32 years older, and of course of Ned Kelly, whom Barry condemned to death.

### **Albert Tucker, Joy Hester and Sweeney Reed**

Albert Tucker (1914-99) and his wife Joy Hester (1920-60) were two of Australia's most fascinating, significant and influential artists. In 1944, they were living in East Melbourne whilst caring for Hester's difficult, ill and deteriorating mother in Elwood and while Hester was heavily pregnant. She felt frustrated not being able to continue to indulge in the various affairs she was having behind Tucker's back (and there is doubt that the biological father was Tucker, Billy Hyde the drummer, is a likely contender). It was all too much, and in December the couple searched for somewhere more convenient to live.

Housing was scarce during the war, so in early 1945 they gladly pounced on a spacious first floor north-facing front room, with a kitchen adjoining (now a bathroom). Here at Figsby, they both worked and shared a 'scruffy' bathroom with other tenants. In this single room, they slept, lived painted and produced commercial art, including the cover of the 1944, *Images of Modern Evil* issue of the famous periodical *Angry Penguins*.

Their son, Sweeney Hallam Tucker was born here on 5 February 1945, named for the protagonist in T S Elliot's macabre, unfinished verse drama, *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926). At first glance, Elliot's Sweeney seems like a philosophising ordinary bloke, not a hero, nor intellectual. His last words seem sensible:

We all gotta do what we gotta do  
We gonna sit here and have a tune  
We're gonna stay and we're gonna do  
And somebody's gonna pay the rent.

But Elliot depicts a threatening world of spiritual terror and exposes a man's horror at his capacity for violence. There's a savage, almost sadistic love duet between Sweeney and Doris: 'Birth and copulation



Joy Hester  
Photo: Albert Tucker



Joy Hester and Sweeney, 1945  
Photo: Albert Tucker.

and death. /That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all. /Birth and copulation and death.' But who was this obsessed Sweeney? Clearly these images influenced Tucker's work, a morally distorting lens on wartime St Kilda, like those in Nolan's *Giggle Palace*. But why on earth would Joy and Bert name the child after such a dark figure? Or did they just like the (slightly Australian) sound of the name, with the bonus of a smart literary reference?

Another Expressionist painter who was influenced by 'Sweeney Agonistes' over 20 years later, was Francis Bacon (1909-92). A dramatic work by Bacon is actually named *Tryptych Inspired by T S Elliot's Poem 'Sweeney Agonistes'* (1967). Bacon had been re-reading the poem, whilst painting the work, which evokes an unspecified threat, depicting two female figures on a bed and the story of a violent death. Other works he painted in 1970 are also influenced by Elliot's poem.

On the balcony, Bert constructed a playpen for their Sweeney. At the age of two, as Tucker and Hester's marriage crumbled, he was taken to live with John and Sunday Reed in their artistic circle at Heide, the former timber farmhouse at 7 Templestowe Road, Bulleen and the Reeds formally adopted him at the age of five (17). Here he was still living when, twenty years later, I knew Sweeney Reed (1945-79) as the

golden-haired, glamorous and charismatic entrepreneur of Strines' Gallery, 130 Faraday Street (cnr Macarthur Place North), Carlton.

Both Strines and Heide are still repositories of art: Strines, its exciting architecture now somewhat bowdlerised, is now Bridget McDonnell Gallery and Heide, much expanded is the Museum of Modern Art. After the Reeds moved to their new house next door to Heide in 1965, Sweeney occupied their former home. Both buildings are now open to the public as Heide I and II.

Hester had grown up in Elwood, and attended St Michael's Church of England Grammar School, 25 Chapel Street, St Kilda (30). St Michael's was founded in 1895 as the Church of England Day School for 73 pupils by the Community of the Sisters of the Church, an Anglican religious order founded in England in 1870 for the education of girls, one of six schools they opened in Australia. In 1895, villas and mansions were flooding the depressed real estate market and they easily purchased Marlton, now St Michael's House, Junior School, Marlton Crescent. Marlton became the boarding house from 1905-75.

Other secular private girls' schools operated in St Kilda at The Priory (from 1872, 28), Wattle House (1858-78, 23) and Oberwyl (1867-1931, 27) and Hofwyl House Academy was for boys (1866-1900s, 44). There was another denominational girls school: the Chislehurst Cromarty School for Girls operating from 1909-10 (45) was Roman Catholic.

In 1973 the Sisters gave up control of St Michael's to a School Council and the last Sisters left in 1977. St Michael's rejoices in the diversity of its students' talent, achieving in music, drama, sport, outdoor education, debating and public speaking: whether they are the stars on stage, backstage with lighting, sound, or make-up.

Joy Hester had savoured growing up in St Kilda's increasingly open beach culture, so for Hester, living in St Kilda was like coming home. Tucker, the puritan, was horrified by the sexual, steamy street life of wartime St Kilda.

In his novel, *My Brother Jack*, George Johnston describes the unravelling of inhibitions in the 1920s, which was only heightened during the war:

Beyond our neat-hedged perimeters, the world suddenly seemed transformed into a jungle of iniquities, of violence, of sex, flaunted revolt, and alarming uncertainties. The newspapers reprimanded in editorials the wayward follies and excesses of the young, quoted hair-raising legal reports of teen-age girls who carried contraceptives in their handbags, spluttered about 'companionate marriage,' lifted their circulations with shocking stories of scandalous goings-on in parked coupés and sedans, and screamed for the burning of books. Along St Kilda Esplanade and in the open parks, policemen and Peeping Toms prowled with torches at the ready to catch flaming youth in the very act of burning.

After painting the masterly, abstracted *Sun Bathers* and the leering *Bride* both in 1944, Tucker returned to his moralistic and iconic *Images of Modern Evil* series. Janine Burke, his biographer, feels the seven images of that series he completed at Figsby, nos 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23 and 24 are his most consistent and best.

Tucker's photographs of Figsby are also illuminating. A visitor was surprised that he has removed all reference to Hester's works from them, only his own are visible. There are also many photographs of baby Sweeney at Robe Street, taken by the proud father.

If Tucker's works painted there were derived from his experience in St Kilda and his reading of fiction, Hester is the only Australian artist to draw on the reality of the Holocaust. She took Sweeney into a newsreel cinema to see '...all these Belsen films.' A woman abused her for exposing a child to such horror on the screen. But she emerged stunned from the experience and produced brush and ink sketches directly from her memory of the film footage. Works such as *A Frightened Woman* resulted. 'Upstairs in their front

room, [metres] from each other, Tucker and Hester produced not only their best art, but some of the best Australian art of that time,' asserts Janine Burke.

Both Hester and Tucker were also open to experiences of the occult: one night, whilst in bed reading they were visited by the loud crash and rushing wind of a poltergeist. They stared at each other paralysed with fear. Poltergeist is German for 'noise ghost,' or 'guest'. Ghosts, Burke explains, are said to be the spirits of the dead, bound to the place they haunt by anguish. Hester and Tucker both wondered if Figsby was haunted and in 1946 they left, and moved to 2 Martin Street in Elwood.

Sidney Nolan (1, 2, 4, 8, 20 & 34,) was a frequent visitor to the Tuckers at Figsby, having grown up in St Kilda. He also painted the street, looking towards the Esplanade, Luna Park (4) and the Catani Gardens (3) in his work *Robe Street, St Kilda*. In 1940, he shared a studio for a year at 5 Smith Street, St Kilda with John Sinclair. It is Sinclair's portrait that is much abstracted as the remarkable painting *Moonboy* painted then, two versions of which exist, and the back of *Robe Street, St Kilda* is a *Portrait of John Sinclair at St Kilda*. Nolan said: '...because I once saw him at St Kilda in front of the setting moon, or, in fact, the rising moon.'

As an art dealer, Sweeney held one exhibition of his father's work: the entire *Images of Modern Evil* series Sweeney Reed Galleries, 266 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. He sold them all to the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Painted in 1945, *Night Image, No 13* in Tucker's *Images of Modern Evil* series, depicts Robe Street from the Esplanade and *Night Image, No 19* shows Figsby's cast-iron balcony.

### **Albert Tucker returns to St Kilda**

These two polychromatic brick 1870s terraces are unusual in Melbourne in being three storied, the lowest floor being a basement, mostly below street level, but with windows facing the street. The very few other basement terraces of this type in Melbourne are in Park Street, Parkville, George Street, Fitzroy and 128, 130 and 138 Powlett Street, East Melbourne. But the type and pattern of the cast-iron lace on the verandahs is beautiful and rare in Melbourne. Dr Graeme Robertson, the authority on cast-iron, identified only five examples comparable in Melbourne (two of which are now demolished) and in Ballarat. The light filigree pattern is more common in New Orleans, itself derived from that in British Regency towns of c1800-20. The horizontal filigree decorative panels in the gates are unique and the Doric pilasters on the leading edge of the boundary walls and the Doric column defining the entry are unusual, though somewhat similar to those at Oberwyl (27), Berkley Hall (26) and St Michael's, 25 Chapel Street.

In the late 1970s, Albert Tucker decided to return to live in St Kilda. He bought a large single-storied Victorian terrace at 55 Blessington Street. This is Woodside, the Daniel Tuomy house, which is the only St Kilda building known to have been designed by the significant nineteenth century architect George R Johnson (1860, 43). Like Figsby, it is polychromatic Italianate, but with a pointed Gothic canted bay window, and a large double-storied stable at the rear which Tucker used as a studio. The Housing Commission of Victoria had owned it, presumably as rental accommodation, with its large rooms partitioned.

'You get a greater sense of the range of... human beings... in... St Kilda. If you walk up and down Fitzroy Street, well there it all is,' Tucker said in 1988. At about that time, he also acquired a 127 sq m studio space in a former warehouse at 50 Langridge Street, on the corner of Patterson Street, in Middle Park, into which large skylights and a mezzanine were inserted. After his death, it lay vacant until 3 June 2006, when it was auctioned.

Tucker returned to Figsby with Burke and acknowledged to her the role of the lacework as inspiration for the grotesque female figures in the *Images of Modern Evil*.

About 1980, after probably 40 years as boarding houses, Figsby and Fareham were renovated by Urban Spaces Pty Ltd, architects and builders, of which a couple of years later I became a director. The rear balconies were removed to capture more south light.

After two years overseas, following completion of her earlier biography of Hester in 1985, Janine Burke also decided to return to live in St Kilda. With supreme irony, and perhaps some little effect on Tucker, now remarried, Burke found a flat in Mimosa, a large 1920s block in Robe Street, only three doors from Figsby.

Tucker's Woodside was auctioned on 23 February 2008 and expected to fetch \$2.5 million.

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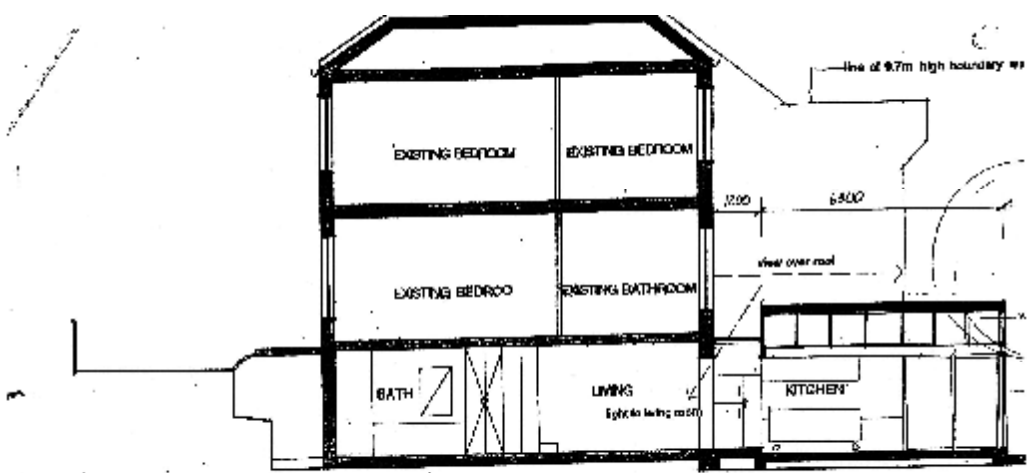
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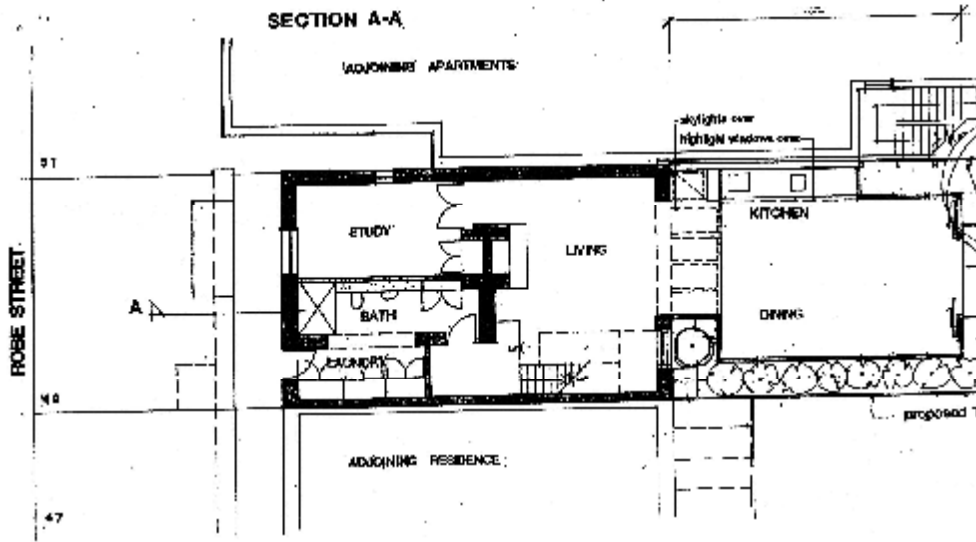
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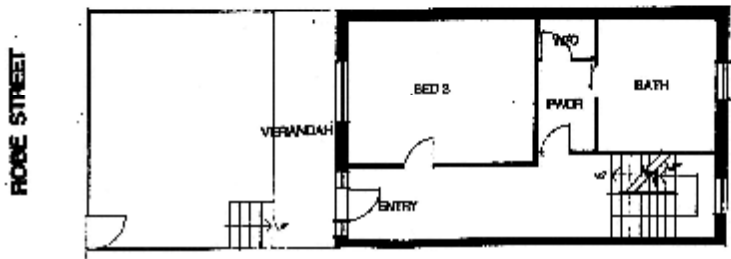
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**SECTION A-A**



**GROUND FLOOR PLAN**



**FIRST FLOOR PLAN**

Longitudinal section and floor plans of Figsby, 47 Robe Street, St Kilda  
 Tucker and Hester occupied the two first floor rooms, Bed 3 and Bath.  
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