

Luna Park's 95th Birthday

The Foreshore Triangle



Parsons, Elizabeth, *Site of Luna Park about 1885*. Watercolour. Reproduced courtesy of La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

95th Highlights

SKHS Committee members who attended Luna Park's 95th birthday party, held 13.12.2007, agreed that the highlight of the evening was the unveiling of a 60sq.m. mural, loosely based on Tales of 1001 Arabian Nights. Created by local artist, Mark Ogge who told St Kilda Times that he (like many of us) loves the escapism of the tales as told by the Princess Scheherezade of Baghdad.

Also of interest was the series of panels outlining the history of Luna Park – named and modelled after the original Luna Park, established (1903) in Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York.

Pre-History

Luna Park, St Kilda was actually built in 1912 on wetlands which our European ancestors gradually "reclaimed" from Port Phillip Bay.

Geologists tell us that the bay (and Bass Strait) area was inundated from c.6000BCE in the meltdown after the Global Ice Age (c.30,000–8,000 years ago). As the waters gradually receded from as far inland as St Kilda Rd, sand, sediment, silt, and ridges built up while salt marshes, lagoons, grasslands, open forests and scrubland developed along the new shoreline.

Lovely Knolls

The area provided seasonal shelter and sustenance for the indigenous Y a l u k i t Willam branch of the Bunurong-Kulin. And, millennia later in 1803CE, when Crown Surveyor Charles Grimes sailed up Port Phillip Bay on HMS Cumberland, he reported "tea

trees, wattles and eucalypts" growing in what was later named St Kilda.

Some three decades on, in August 1835, a party from the civilian founding ship Enterprise reportedly came ashore in a whale-boat in the Elwood-St Kilda area. They were attracted by the "lovely knolls around the lagoons" and noted "flocks, almost innumerable of teal, ducks, geese, swans and minor fowl."

Public Recreation

From the early 1840s as more and more Europeans and some Asians moved in to the vicinity, the so-called "swampy wastelands" were gradually filled in. By 1884 the foreshore was drained and officially reserved for public recreational purposes.

It remained open public space until St Kilda Council set up a Foreshore Trust in 1906. Their brief:- "to beautify and develop the area". Carlo Catani went on to re-create it as a Mediterranean-style resort, and successive St Kilda councils and state governments began generating revenue through granting seasonal (short) and long-term leases to amusement and entertainment providers, as well as tea-rooms, kiosks, advertising billboards, and Luna Park.

Resources:

Grimes, C., ADB Online.
Cooper, J.B., History of St Kilda: 1840-1930.
Woo, C., Luna Park, Article, City of St Kilda, 1991
www.lunapark

Port Phillip City Council is currently assessing three reports concerning the Triangle Site bounded by Luna Park, St Kilda Beach and the Esplanade. They are:

1. An economic and community impact analysis;
2. A progress report from the Triangle Design Review Committee (see also below);
3. Commitments made by the developer (Citta) to Council during negotiations.

Council's responses have been deferred to a Special Statutory Planning Committee Meeting at 6pm on Thursday 7 February. However, the reports are being made available online for community consideration a week prior to the meeting.

Triangle Design Review Committee

In December last year two local architects, ex-councillor David Brand and Peter Johnson (coincidentally SKHS's current Heritage Officer), were invited to join the City of Port Phillip's Triangle Design Review Committee.

The TDRC consists of five members. Its job is to review aspects of the Developer's [Citta] work during the design development phase of the developer's contract "that are typically of a heritage or community nature or that visually or physically impact on that area, including:-

- Palais Theatre;
- Community Development (including public open space, plazas, pavement, bridges or pedestrian links, balustrades or barriers, hard and soft landscaping, sun shading, lighting and furniture);
- Building facades and external treatment of structures;
- Building roof aesthetics, plant rooms and enclosures, exposed services and screening treatments;
- Advertising or signage; and
- Integrated Urban Art (as described in the 'Request For Proposal')."

The first report dealing with "opportunities for the improvements to the Esplanade Viewlines" is now available on the Port Phillip website: http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/triangle_site_further_information.html.

The Astor

Astor Saved

As *The Age* reported, 7 December 2007, the Astor's sale to St Michael's Grammar School, one of Victoria's top ten private schools, on 6 December saved it "from an uncertain future" and "opens up new opportunities for both the school and the cinema".

St Michael's, renowned for its innovative teaching and learning programs, is only the Astor's third owner since its doors first opened, 3 April 1935.

Simon Gipson, Head of St Michael's, said after the sale that the cinema would eventually double as a "flexible arts venue" for its Performing Arts productions (currently about nine a year), school functions and speech nights while the Astor would – for the foreseeable future – continue to screen its double-bill programs (with occasional single features) of unusual and eclectic films.

'Hands across the Table'

Despite fears by residents in 1935 that "the Astor was too close to churches", and that "such a noisy, showy place of entertainment would detract from the dignity and charm of one of the loveliest localities in St Kilda", it was opened with great fanfare and a full house on 3 April, 1936 (Fogarty).

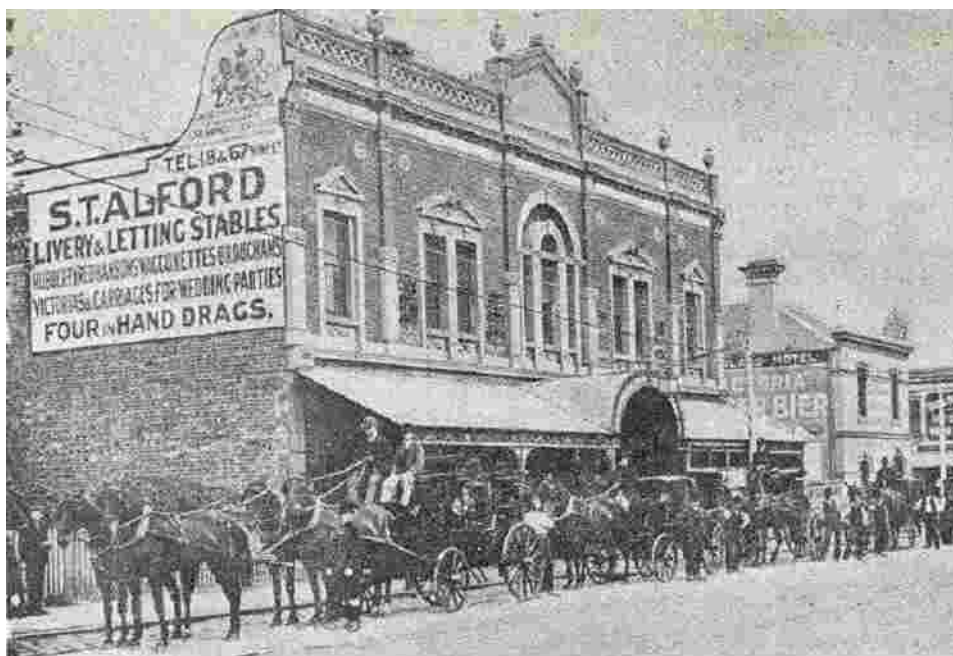
Richard Peterson in his book, *A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St. Kilda and their People*, wrote of its glittering debut: "One imagines the sky alive with sweeping klieglights" as patrons flocked to see 'Hands Across the Table', a comedy starring Carole Lombard and Fred MacMurray.

Brief History of Site

In 1894, Mr S. T. (Thomas) Alford constructed a Livery Stables at No.3 Chapel Street, East St Kilda (next door to the Gippsland Hotel). Postal records for 1908-13 refer to the premises as the 'Diamond Theatre'. Ralph Neill described the 'Diamond' in *A Wide Screen Epic* as "part vaudeville theatre, part cinema". After further development, 1913-14, Alford changed the name and operated it as the 'Theatre Rex'.

All images: kindness of George Florence, Proprietor Astor Theatre

Main Text: Florence, G., *A Chronological outline of the ownership and physical development of 'The Astor Theatre' from 1894 -1969*, Various Notes, Melbourne, 2008.



LIVERY STABLES, 3 CHAPEL STREET, WINDSOR

This was despite WWI, and the introduction of a new Federal Tax on Entertainment in 1917, which, reportedly, resulted in the closure of "smaller picture halls in the four years from 1918-1921" including the Rex (although some accounts say the Rex closed in 1917).

By 1924, the versatile Mr Alford had converted the site into 'Alford's Motor Garage and Taxis'. He ran it as such for the next ten years or so until he sold up to Mr Frank O'Collins, director of Astor Theatres Pty Ltd.

The building was demolished with the exception of its rear outer wall which would form the perimeter of the new 'Astor Theatre'. In fact, some of the earlier horse rings are still attached to this wall.

CITY OF ST. KILDA.

APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION OF PUBLIC HALL OR PLACE OF AMUSEMENT.

Under Part V, of the 11th Schedule of the "Local Government Act 1901."

BY-LAW No. 79.

ST. KILDA, March 30 1914.

TO THE TOWN CLERK,
CITY OF ST. KILDA.

Sir,-

I hereby make application to the Council of the City of St. Kilda to register the premises hereunder, of which I am the occupier, as a *Public Theatre* for the year 1914, in compliance with terms and conditions of the above By-law.

The particulars of the premises referred to are as hereunder:

Name and Address of Occupier	Location and Description of the Premises (as shown on plan)	Proposed for which use is to be used	Period of Registration
<i>T. Alford 3 Chapel St St Kilda</i>	<i>3 Chapel St St Kilda</i>	<i>Theatre</i>	<i>70 31 Dec 1914</i>

I have the honor to be, Sir,

S. G. Alford

Jazz Moderne

O'Collins commissioned architect, Ron Morton Taylor to design the new theatre, and builder, Clement Langford began construction in December 1935.

Today, the building retains its 1936 appearance and is, arguably, considered Melbourne's first and finest *Jazz Moderne* style cinemas. Its Art Deco interior contains "a stepped ceiling", "opaline light fittings", "a shallow dome" and "fine wrought steel chevron-patterned friezes".

SKHS welcomes, and will acknowledge your Astor anecdotes as well as any memorabilia/ephemera and pics.

The Astor

Competition

In spite of, or perhaps as a result of the Depression, the 1930s were heady days for suburban cinemas. Over the next two decades, the Astor was filled several nights of the week.

The auditorium originally provided seating for 1692 patrons, (currently 1150).



That was despite nine other cinemas in surrounding areas, with four in the immediate districts. Directly competing with the Astor were:-

- the new 'Palais Theatre', constructed on public land in 1927 and still standing today;
- the 'Victory' on the corner of Carlisle and Barkly Street, constructed in 1921, closed in 1974 and reopened as the 'National Theatre';
- the 'Memorial', located at the St Kilda Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall, constructed in 1927, closed in 1957;
- the 'Hoyts Windsor' located at 174 Peel Street, Windsor, constructed 1936-1937, closed in 1962.

The 'Astor' also competed with older, more established theatres. Among them:- the 'Broadway', 147 Ormond Road in Elwood, constructed in 1919, closed 1960; the 'Royal', 30 Chapel Street, Windsor, constructed in 1911, closed 1941; and the 'Empress', 217 Chapel Street, Prahran, constructed in 1913, demolished 1958. (Not to mention those in nearby Albert Park, South and Port Melbourne.)

Crunch

Crunch-time for cinemas came with the arrival of television in Australia, timed to coincide with the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne.

Audiences dwindled. Over the next ten years cinema operators scrambled to survive by installing Cinema-scope screens, new sound systems and making various modifications.

Box office



Alterations in 1961, saw the ticket-box removed from the centre of the foyer.

It seemed the Astor was doomed when the owners decided to sell in 1964. Rumour had it that it would be turned into a bowling alley or a library.

Cosmopolitan Melbourne

Since 1947, Cosmopolitan Motion Pictures/Cosmopolitan Theatres, headed up by Mr Stan Raft, were developing a chain of (12) cinemas around Melbourne to cater for the post WW1 H e l l e n i c Community — reputed to be the largest of any city, outside of Greece.

Mr Stan Raft
Pioneer of Greek language cinema in Australia.



('Tanda Investments' (unrelated to Cosmopolitan) purchased the Astor site in 1964. They elongated the stage to facilitate live performances, which in turn reduced its seating capacity from 1673 to 1200.

Tanda also showed Greek movies for some years before leasing it to Cosmopolitan Theatres. Stan Raft took over operation of the Astor in the late 1960s. From then on throughout the 1970s the cinema prospered with a mix of Greek films and concerts until the very early 1980s, when audience numbers again began to wane.

The decline coincided with the introduction of SBS, the advent of video rentals, and, as the Astor's owners put it, the "Australianisation" of the Hellenic population.

The screen went dark and once again it seemed the Astor's days were numbered. It looked as though it might end up as a bingo hall or a reception centre.

Aussie Icon

The building was closed for about a year before young projectionist George Florence — a nephew of Stan Raft — took up the baton and a lease. His brief from when he began managing the Astor was and is — to preserve this unique part of Australia's cinema heritage for future generations.

George Florence and Marzipan the Astor cat.

Photo: Joe Armao



The theatre reopened on 17 Sept 1982 with *King Kong*, a classic film from 1933, supported by a stage performance of 'The African Drums' by La Trobe University students.

Since then, and despite Videos, Internet, DVD's, and Plasma TVs, Florence has transformed the Astor into the iconic movie theatre recognized Australia-wide today and listed on the Victorian Heritage Register.

New Era

After purchasing the Astor, Simon Gipson (St Michael's) commented: "We are honoured to become custodians of a building that holds such emotional and architectural significance for St Kilda." He added that "St Michael's has been a part of the St Kilda community for 113 years and remains on its original site, just a block down the road from the Astor." (See also next page.)

Proprietor, George Florence who has a number of years left on his existing lease with a long option, announced after the sale that he is confident the theatre will survive, and thanked us all for our ongoing support and patronage.

SOURCES:

Please contact *St Kilda Times* for details of sources.

ASTOR DOUBLE-FEATURES

Adults \$13. Concession \$12. Children/Pensioners \$11.

WICKED WEDNESDAYS

All Tickets \$8 All Sessions

St Michael's Grammar School: New Owner of the Astor Theatre

The following extract was downloaded with kind permission of St Michael's Grammar School, the new owner of the Astor Theatre, and transcribed by FB.

St Michael's Grammar School, East St Kilda, which purchased the Astor Theatre in December 2007, is one of few schools in Melbourne over one hundred years old, and still on its original site.

It is possible to trace the history of the school, building by building, from Marlton Crescent to the modern Senior School in Redan Street and the buildings in Chapel Street ... The Church of England⁺⁺ Day School, as St Michael's was originally known, was opened on 22 April 1895 by the Community of the Sisters⁺ of the Church, and by the end of that year there were 73 pupils. The boarding house opened in 'Marlton' in 1905 and continued to operate until its closure in 1975.

In 1973, an era ended when the Community Sisters gave up control and management of the School and a new School Council was established. In 1975, the Board of Governors decided that St Michael's would commence the process towards co-education. The last Sisters left St Michael's in 1977, having exercised a deep influence over the students, inspiring them with ideals and developing standards that they carried with them when school days were over and they faced the world.

The new Senior School, surrounding the (unroofed) quadrangle, was opened and blessed by Archbishop Frank Woods in December 1967. It was built on the site of three properties in Redan Street that the Sisters had purchased in February that year. The Vicars Foote Hall together with the Chapel and Tuck Shop, was opened in 1973.

- Frank Woods House, at No. 8 Redan Street, is now the home of the Visual Arts and Design Faculty. Originally called "Albany", it was owned by the School, sold in 1974, repurchased in 1983 and renamed in honour of Archbishop Frank Woods.
- Margaret Thomas House, named after a former Headmistress of St Michael's, was opened in 1984. Originally used as the Junior School Library, it was extensively remodelled and is now the site of the Kindergarten.
- Hewison House, named after a former Headmaster of St Michael's, was opened in 1988. The centre for Senior Studies also opened in 1988.
- The St. George's Uniting Church property (the Choir Hall and Drama Studio) was acquired by long-term lease in 1990.
- The Gymnasium and Swimming Pool were opened in 1991.
- The Design and Technology Centre was acquired and renovated in 1993.
- The School purchased the Masonic Hall in Crimea Street, originally erected as a Baptist Church, in 1995. After extensive renovation and some extension, the Wilma Hannah Library and Emily Hall, named after two important friends of St. Michael's, opened in 1997. At the same time, a roofed outdoor café on the Centenary Students' Centre building got under way, and was completed in 1998.
- In 2005 the Community of the Sisters of the Church Learning Centre, a state-of-the-art teaching and learning facility for Years 7, 11, and 12 became operational along with the Coleman Walk – a pedestrian spine through the centre of the School that enhances the collegiate atmosphere of St Michael's.
- In early 2006 the Frances Newson Oval was transformed from a grass surface to a synthetic, multi-function playing area capable of hosting a variety of sports in all weathers.
- Construction commenced on a new teaching and learning centre for Prep to Year 4 and scheduled for occupation in 2008.
- [On 6 December 2007, St Michael's purchased the Astor Theatre, Nos 1–3 Chapel Street, East St Kilda. The school, now with over one thousand students, intends using the Astor's auditorium for its important speech nights, school functions and for its Performing Arts stage productions.]

⁺ Community of the Sisters of the Church, now an international community of Anglican Sisters, was founded in London by Emily Ayckbown in 1870, and she placed the Sisters under the protection of St Michael (Archangel).

⁺⁺The Church of England or Anglican Church dates back to when Gregory the Great appointed a Benedictine monk as first Archbishop of Canterbury in 596/7CE. Known to us as St Augustine, his mission was to establish Judaic-Christianity among the Angles, Saxons & Jutlanders – who had progressively occupied much of southern and eastern England, originally called Albion, since early in the 5th century. [He was also to bring recalcitrant Celtic (Coptic-type) Christians into line with Roman Orthodoxy. FB]

St Michael's Grammar School was one of six schools established by the 'Community of the Sisters of the Church' (CSC) in different parts of Australia.

CSC was invited to Australia to work for the further education of girls, and in 1892 a party of seven Sisters landed in Hobart. [Their names were Sisters Bridget, Hannah, Irene, Lucy, May, Phyllis and Rose.]

Arriving in Melbourne from Tasmania later that same year, the Sisters began searching for a residence that could also serve as a school for girls.

Among the hundreds of villas and mansions flooding the then very depressed real estate market, which followed the 'Marvellous Melbourne Land Boom' of the 1880s, they secured 'Marlton', now Michael's House, which stands in the heart of the Junior School.

Marlton House

"Marlton was at its grandest when home to wealthy merchant Andrew Murky [sic] who had the house built in 1857" (Melbourne Mansions Database (MMD) quoting Dr Victoria Peel, St Michael's Grammar School: a study in educational change (pp31–3).)

Its next owner, Edwin Fowler advertised Marlton for sale in Jan 1859 and subsequently, his estate in 1861.

MMD notes an auction notice in The Argus, 2 Feb 1861. It advertises Marlton as "a first class mansion, with beautiful gardens, on an estate of five acres. Now in occupation by B. B. Nicholson."

Tenders, calling for extensive renovations to Marlton, then owned by Dr Henry R. Madden, are recorded by MMD in July 1864.

However, by 1873, merchant George W. Parbury was in residence, and there was an auction for the sale of furniture at Marlton in Nov 1873.

Merchant, William Siddeley bought the estate in 1875 and lived there till 1880. This was most likely after the 1874 sale of his Kew property, Elm Lodge. After 1880, Siddeley moved to 'Charnwood House' and then 'Shelford' where he died in 1905.

The estate appears to have been subdivided around this time as the next recorded owner, Andrew Murray, advertised the house (plus furniture) for sale on 25 Nov 1882 "with grounds of 1 acre 20 perches." The new purchaser is noted as A. Livingston.

Apparently, it was converted to a sanatorium before Rev. E. L. Backhouse bought it in 1885 to set up his Grammar School. He subsequently sold Marlton to a Mr Butcher who operated it as a boarding house before the Sisters of the Church leased, then purchased Marlton with the aid of "a personal donation from one of the founding sisters".