CAMBERWELL HISTORY

RECORDING THE HISTORY OF CAMBERWELL AND DISTRICT

Camberwell Historical Society



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Principal Patron: Professor Emeritus Geoffrey Blainey, AC Patron: Her Worship the Mayor of Boroondara, Cr Coral Ross

MEN OF GOD AND WOMEN OF PROPERTY

Some people talk of morality, and some of religion, but give me a little snug property. Maria Edgeworth (1767 – 1849), The Absentee

Bryony Cosgrove

Bryony Cosgrove has worked in book publishing for over thirty years and has taught in Publishing and Communications programs at Melbourne, RMIT and Deakin universities. Her book *Portrait of a Friendship: the Letters of Barbara Blackman and Judith Wright, 1950-2000* was published in 2007. She has a Masters in Biography and Life Writing and is currently completing a PhD at Monash University. She and her family have lived in Camberwell at 6 Moorhouse Street for 22 years. The Benson/Dickens family were previous owners of the house and kindly provided the family photographs.

Part 2 of the article which appeared in the June Newsletter



On the last day of summer, in 1895, Marian Benson's oldest daughter, Emma Mary, giving herself the title 'lady' in the column reserved for 'rank or profession', married William Thomson Dickens in the front parlour of 'Melrose', according to the customs of the Church of Christ.¹ The newlyweds moved further out to Allan Street in Brunswick, where Emma Mary gave birth to her first child, Charles Vernon, on 4 December. Early in 1896, William Arthur was photographed with his daughter, Marian, his granddaughter Emma Mary, and his great-grandson, Charles Vernon at Jabez and Jane Dickens' residence at 94 Elgin Street, Carlton – four generations.

William Arthur, Marian Benson, Charles Vernon Dickens and Emma Mary Dickens

¹ Emma Mary Benson and William Thomson Dickens, marriage certificate, district of Carlton, Colony of Victoria, 1895 (No 427).

William Arthur, well turned out in a three-piece suit and watch chain, wears a wedding ring, although he had been a widower for nearly 50 years; the slightly scuffed shoes perhaps the sort of detail only a wife would think to attend to. Marian Benson, her wavy hair pulled back severely, is firmly laced into a dark, fitted, leg-o-mutton-sleeved ensemble, her hand resting protectively on the back of her daughter's chair. Emma Mary, a new mother proudly displaying her elaborately dressed baby son, lightens the mood of the photograph with her slight smile. In her elegant, pale-striped gown, her hair curling softly around her forehead, she radiates beauty and confidence. William Arthur would live to see the birth of two more grandsons before his death in 1902, at which time Marian Benson stood to inherit a third of his estate.

By late 1895, Marian Benson had moved a couple of blocks from Amess Street to a two-storey commercial property at 1016 Lygon Street, one of five in a well-positioned corner block, fitted with cast-iron lace and corrugated –iron shopfront awnings, fronting both Lygon and Pigdon streets in North Carlton.² The awnings were an important architectural feature for businesses, protecting goods displayed in shop windows from the sun as well as people from the weather, encouraging them to linger.³ Private residences were on the first floor. At the time, tradesmen and other investors commonly had two or three residences built simultaneously, living in one and renting out the others. The process might then be repeated with the owner moving to newer, outer suburbs while retaining earlier investment properties.⁴ Marian Benson may have retained the Amess Street property while renting the upstairs dwelling on Lygon Street; her four daughters would all have entered the workforce by 1895, and her son, William Herbert, had returned to Ballarat where he was to become a tea merchant.⁵

On 4 July 1897, Jabez Dickens died from 'old age & exhaustion', 6 a month before the birth of Emma Mary's second child, named Jabez Campbell in memory of his grandfather. 7 The Dickens & Sons' barrow factory at 94 Elgin Street was willed to Jabez' wife, Jane, who transferred ownership of the property and the business to her six children in equal shares in 1901. 8 Jane lived another ten years, but the cause of death on her death certificate – 'senile decay' for an unstated period – suggests that she may have been suffering from dementia for some time, and that the early transfer of property had been a necessary precaution. 9

William Thomson Dickens, who is variously referred to as an engineer, a carpenter or a body builder – a respectable trade 100 years ago rather than the description of a fitness fanatic – on his children's birth and marriage certificates, probably took over the running of the barrow factory with his brother, George. There is no academic record to indicate that William's qualifications as an engineer were formal, however he is remembered in the family as being a practical man able to turn his hand to anything, fond of machinery and inventing gadgets. ¹⁰

Emma Mary and William Dickens had moved from Brunswick to Preston by 1899 when their third son, Eliott Thomson, was born. Marian Benson was present at this birth, as with the two previous, and the Dickens' High Street home would have been easily reached by train or tramline from Marian's residence in North Carlton. William pioneered the cause of the Church of Christ in the new suburb, and he and his brother George helped to erect a chapel there. Preston's tanning, claybrick and pottery industries would have provided business for the

² The row of shops remains, however 1016 is now empty and derelict.

³ Peter Yule (ed), Carlton: a history, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2004, p. 253.

⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵ Sands and McDougall Directory for Ballarat, 1912.

⁶ Jabez Campbell, death certificate, district of Carlton, Colony of Victoria, 1897 (No 8149).

⁷ Jabez Campbell Dickens, birth certificate, Brunswick, Colony of Victoria, 1897 (No 17206).

⁸ Jill Skerry, family recollections (3 June 2005).

⁹ Jane Dickens, death certificate, district of Carlton, State of Victoria, 1911 (No 4259).

¹⁰ Jill Skerry, family recollections (3 June 2005).

Dickens' barrow factory, and the developing suburb, with its dairy and poultry farms, market gardens and flower nurseries, would have provided a pleasant environment for a young family, completed with the birth of Jeannie in 1904. Her birth certificate records Victoria's statehood;¹¹ the Colony of Victoria had become a State when the Commonwealth of Australia was inaugurated on 1 January 1901.

Of Emma Mary and William's children, Jeannie would receive the most expensive education, finishing at Fintona, a private girls' school, when the family moved across the Yarra River to Camberwell after the First World War. Charles Vernon would become an orchardist and farmer. Jabez Campbell would become a company manager. Eliott Thomson trained as an architect, and after a cadetship in Canberra became the city architect of Perth. Jeannie, who trained as a teacher, was to marry into a family of Avenel graziers, the Sheltons, known in the district for their part in the legend of Ned Kelly. As a boy, on his way to school, Jeannie's father-in-law, Dick Shelton, had been rescued from a flooded creek in Avenel by a 10-year-old Ned Kelly. The Shelton family rewarded Ned with a green silk sash trimmed with gold bullion, a possession he treasured for the rest of his life. 13

The Dickens boys gave their parents reason to be proud, however the outbreak of the First World War had been cause for dissension in the family. Charles Vernon and Jabez Campbell were of an age to enlist when England declared war on Germany on 4 August 1918; by 31 August of that year thousands of young Australian and New Zealand men had joined up. Charles Vernon, against his father's wishes, enlisted at Preston on 1 February 1916, at the age of 20, and on 11 July he embarked for North Africa on board the *Mongolia* as a member of the Light Horse Regiment, serving as a driver in the Australian Imperial Force 1st Light Horse Machine Gun Squad. While serving overseas, Charles Vernon suffered several serious bouts of tonsillitis, his health deteriorating to such an extent that on 4 February 1918 he completed a standard issue army will, witnessed by two other soldiers, in which he left his entire estate to his mother, Emma Mary Dickens. On 22 October of that year, Eliott Thomson also attempted to enlist, and a request for permission was sent to his parents, now living at 94 Elgin Street, by the State Recruiting Committee of Victoria. The declaration of peace on 11 November meant that Eliott's enlistment was not processed – no doubt much to his parents' relief.

Charles Vernon arrived home safely on 26 August 1919 aboard the *Dunluce Castle*, surviving the Spanish influenza epidemic that swept through troop ships and around the Pacific at the end of the war, killing thousands of soldier and civilians. He returned to Avenel where, assisted by relatives of his grandfather, William Arthur, he continued working as an orchardist and began to establish a farm to run sheep. Eliott also left Melbourne, first for the new national capital on a cadetship with the firm supervising the building of the new Parliament House, and then across the Nullarbor to Perth. Jabez Campbell, who had not enlisted, tried his hand at various trades and eventually became the managing director of the firm McKenzie and Holland in Elsternwick.¹⁷

By 1920, Emma Mary and William Dickens had moved to the prosperous middle-class suburb of Camberwell, where they enrolled Jeannie at Fintona, then housed in a vacant mansion on Burke Road and one of the largest private girls' schools in a suburb of 'church-going people of middling wealth and high ambition who tended to favour private secondary schools'. ¹⁸ If the

¹¹ Jeannie Dickens, birth certificate, Preston, State of Victoria, 1904 (No 28249).

¹² Jill Skerry, family recollections (3 June 2005).

¹³ Ian Jones, Ned Kelly: a short life, Lothian Books, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 20-1.

¹⁴ Charles Vernon Dickens, series accession number B2455/1, item barcode 3504799.

¹⁵ Original will in the possession of Jill Skerry, Charles Vernon's granddaughter.

¹⁶ Original papers in the possession of Jill Skerry.

¹⁷ Jill Skerry, family recollections (3 June 2005).

¹⁸ Geoffrey Blainey, A History of Camberwell, Jacaranda Press and Camberwell City Council, Melbourne, 1964, p. 72.

Dickens fitted this description it was more likely due to Emma Mary's eye for real estate rather than her husband's business sense. Although William Dickens is listed as the ratepayer for 14 Waterloo Street, Camberwell from 1920 to 1927,¹⁹ the property was owned by Emma Mary in her own right; the double block was also subdivided into number 14 and number 14a Waterloo Street, probably to take advantage of the building boom that accompanied the end of the war. The Dickens residence, at number 14, was named 'Sharnbrook' after the Bedfordshire village in which William Dickens' father, Jabez, had been born.

From the turn of the century, Camberwell had begun to acquire a nonconformist or dissenting flavour with the fast growth of Presbyterian and Independents, followed by the Methodists and Baptists. The Church of Christ established a chapter in Camberwell in 1916,²⁰ and the first wedding celebrated at the Aird Street Church constructed in the early 1920s was that of Charles Vernon Dickens and Eileen Leitch, daughter of a prominent local family who had been instrumental in the building of the church.²¹ The presence of a strong Church of Christ community would have appealed to the Dickens family, and they became well-known and respected brethren at Aird Street. The nonconformist churches also affected Camberwell's attitude to the social problem of hotels and alcohol, and in 1920, the Anti-Liquor League succeeded in banning the sale of alcohol in Boroondara after a State-wide public poll.²²

In July 1926, Emma Mary sold 14 Waterloo Street to a Mrs Pauline Elise Pierre -Humbert for £1650²³ in order to buy a 'brick villa' at 6 Moorhouse Street, Camberwell, across Prospect Hill Road from Waterloo Street, the following month.²⁴ Although the purchase price for the Moorhouse Street residence was only £1350, Emma Mary was buying a substantial dwelling, and by this time her three sons had married and her daughter Jeannie was teaching and boarding at a private girls' school in Geelong.²⁵ The Victoria Insurance Company policy for the property lists a slate-roofed brick dwelling, an attached billiard room and conservatory, a stable, coach house and 'man's room'. 26 From 1912 to 1914, the house had accommodated 'Miss E. Gearing's Girls' Business College', ²⁷ and the valuation of the house and contents prepared after William Dickens' death in 1950 indicates that Emma Mary also had a commercial purpose in mind: she set up 6 Moorhouse Street as a boarding house. In order to achieve this, the billiards room and conservatory at the back of the house were converted into two sleep outs and a kitchenette.²⁸ Even with these additions, there was room in the back garden – the block was 170 feet long and had rear-lane access - for fruit trees, a vegetable patch and a chook house. Self-sufficiency was to become increasingly important as the Great Depression began to take effect at the end of the 1920s.

Although the majority of boarding houses were concentrated in the inner city, 6 Moorhouse Street was close to rail and tram lines and only a short walk to Camberwell Junction – a busy commercial centre by the 1920s. The prominence of women managers in the boarding-house market has been well documented, and the reasons for this – that it was an extension of women's domestic tasks and perhaps the best option for widows and other women unable to rely on male income for appropriate support ²⁹– would seem to apply to both Marian Benson and Emma Mary Dickens.

¹⁹ Sands & McDougall Directory for Melbourne, 1919-1925.

²⁰ Don Thomas, *Balwyn Church of Christ: seventy not out!*, self-published by Balwyn Church of Christ, Melbourne, 1992, introduction.

²¹ Jill Skerry, family recollections (3 June 2005).

²² Geoffrey Blainey, A History of Camberwell, pp. 79-81.

²³ Contract of Sale under the Transfer of Land Act 1915, vol 4135, folio 826884 (photocopy of original).

²⁴ Contract of Sale under the Transfer of land Act 1915, vol 2304, folio 460779 (photocopy of original).

²⁵ Jill Skerry, family recollections (3 June 2005).

²⁶ Victoria Insurance Company Policy No 197250, transferred to Emma Mary Dickens 23/8/26 (photocopy of original).

²⁷ Sands & McDougall Directory for Melbourne, 1911-1918.

²⁸ F.G. Woods & Co., Dickens Estate valuation, 16 June 1950 (photocopy of original).

²⁹ Seamus O'Hanlon, *Together Apart: boarding house, hostel and flat life in pre-war Melbourne*, Australian Scholarly Press, Melbourne, 2002, pp. 29-30.

Emma Mary was assisted in the running of the house by her mother and by Lizzie Slater Sinclair, who was known to the Dickens children as Auntie Bessie or Auntie Lizzie, and who had also lived with the family at Waterloo Street.³⁰ She was to be a beneficiary of Emma Mary's will, in which she is referred to as 'my friend'. 31 The boarding house rooms appear to have been let fully furnished and with bed linen and towels. The contents of 'Mrs Clark's Room', for example included 'Pine W. Robe', 'S. Bedstead, Wire & Bdg', 'Blankets, Sheets & B.Cover', 'Tapestry Armchair' and 'Ass'd Vases & Ornaments' and 'Ass'd Pictures'; the last items perhaps once chosen with care but now simply part of a job lot in a deceased estate as listed by the real estate agent and valuer.³² 'Mr Dickens' Room' contained a 'S. Bed, Wire & Bedding' along with a cedar chest, wardrobe and table; his great-granddaughter recalls that William Dickens had a little room off the kitchen and spent a lot of time in the shed at the end of the garden.³³ The dining room, one of the beautifully proportioned and high-ceilinged rooms of the original house, was well furnished with tables, chairs, bookcases and sideboards full of table linen, crockery and glassware, suggesting that the boarders at 6 Moorhouse Street also took their meals at the house. Apart from the vegetables, fruit and eggs from the back garden, the milkman, the baker and occasionally the grocer would have made home deliveries; there was also a butcher's shop at the end of the street.

Marian Benson did not survive a bout of pneumonia in the winter of 1930 and died at home at 6 Moorhouse Street at the age of 87. 'Rank or profession' on the death certificate register had by then been updated to 'occupation'; Marian's was still listed as 'home duties'.³⁴

Emma Mary also died at home, aged 75, from cardiac failure, on 7 May 1945 as the Second World War was drawing to a close.³⁵ She was survived by her husband and her four children, and even though she also was given the final job description of 'home duties', she left her stamp on the family property and finances. Her house was left to her daughter, Jeannie Dickens Shelton, on the understanding that William Dickens could continue to live there for the remainder of his life – five years later, almost to the day, he succumbed to cerebral thrombosis at the age of 89, dignified with the title 'Engineer, retired'.³⁶ Jeannie, who was by this time living at Avenel, had the house valued and sold almost immediately for the then considerable sum of £3000. It was bought by the undertaker who handled William Dickens' funeral.

Marian Benson and Emma Mary and William Dickens were all buried according to the rites of the Church of Christ in Burwood Cemetery, in the same grave.³⁷ An obituary for William appeared in *Australian Christian* at the end of May 1950, detailing his involvement with the Church of Christ throughout his life, and referring to 'the fact that he came from a long line of God-fearing men and women'. He was acknowledged for his devotion to the Church, his fine preaching, his keen study of religious books and his excellence as a craftsman. Emma Mary is mentioned in passing as 'his faithful wife'. William Benson is not mentioned at all on the gravestone in Burwood Cemetery.

All families have public and private stories. In the Dickens family, behind the public faces of Men of God and women engaged in 'home duties' are Women of Property.

³⁰ Jill Skerry, family recollections (3 June 2005).

³¹ Last will and testament of Emma Mary Dickens, 14 December 1943 (photocopy of original).

³² F.G. Woods & Co., Dickens Estate valuation.

³³ Jill Skerry, family recollections (3 June 2005).

³⁴ Marian Benson, death certificate, district of Camberwell, State of Victoria, 1930 (No 8572).

³⁵ Emma Mary Dickens, death certificate, district of Melbourne, State of Victoria, 1945 (No 4153).

³⁶ William Thomson Dickens, death certificate, district of Melbourne, State of Victoria, 1950 (No 4991).

³⁷ Victorian Cemeteries 1858-1998: Burwood Cemetery Headstones, State Library of Victoria (GMF 94 Box 1).

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SUBSCRIPTIONS DUE

Reminder that the Society's financial year operates from 1st July to 30th June and subscriptions are due and payable on or before July 1st each year. Thank you to those who have already paid their membership fees.

VALE: Kathleen Mary Mackie "Kath" 3.3.1926 - 14.7.2014



Growing up in Kyneton where she attended primary school, Kathleen attended PLC boarding school in Melbourne, where she was a House Captain and School Prefect. She excelled in several team sports. While attending Melbourne University, Kath was resident in University Women's College. She graduated with a Diploma of Social Studies and her first job as a social worker was with the Children's Psychiatric Clinic.

She met Bill Mackie in Kyneton and they discovered they were both studying in Melbourne. They married in 1949 and the birth of her first child interrupted her career. When her eldest son Bill was at a country boarding school she accepted a fellow Malaysian student, making her Vermont home as his base in Melbourne over the shorter vacations for 7 years. Then when Bill was on exchange for a year with a student from a Scottish school she similarly hosted the latter at Vermont.

Drama and acting was always an interest; she performed in M.U. annual student reviews, Ormond College plays and Melbourne University Drama Club. She was fit and active and played tennis for many years. As an alumna of University Women's College (now University College) she became a member of the College Council and a Life Governor.

Although her Stewart forebears lived in Perth and the Oakley family were Victorian she strongly supported husband Bill in his activities with the Camberwell Historical Society and his research into his Bates, Clancy, Reid and Walsh ancestors in Camberwell, Hawthorn, and Melbourne from the first arrival in 1840. Kath will be sadly missed by the members of Camberwell Historical Society.

Kath is survived by her husband Bill, children Fiona, Bill, Merran and Alistair, grandchildren, Stewart, Campbell, Meghan, Maddie, Lucy, Charlie and Sylvia and great grandchildren, Charlotte, Ellie and Sebastian.

GLEN IRIS PRIMARY SCHOOL CELEBRATING 150 YEARS IN 2015



Did you attend Glen Iris Primary School? Do you know someone who attend Glen Iris Primary School?

In September 2015 GIPS will celebrate 150 years of education. They would like to invite all past students and families to participate in the celebrations.

GIPS would like past students to send contact details to:

Glen Iris Primary School, 170 Glen Iris Road, Glen Iris, Victoria, 3146

RETIREMENTS FROM THE COMMITTEE

The President, Committee and the Camberwell Historical Society have greatly appreciated the contributions made by Frances Watson and Anna Carina. Frances was instrumental in CHS' successful grant applications. Anna played a central role in the recent Middle Camberwell campaign. Their contributions to the Committee will be greatly missed.

CAN YOU IDENTIFY THIS HOUSE?



It is believed that this house is in the Kew, Camberwell or Hawthorn area and that this photograph was taken around 1900-1903. If you can identify this house please contact the President, George Fernando at enquiries@chs.org.au.

CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY - DONATIONS TO THE COLLECTION

Camberwell Historical Society would like to thank Trevor Hart's family for donations of books and files from Trevor's personal collection to CHS. These items make a valuable addition to our collection.

Many photographs of Camberwell Junction taken in 1989 by Mr Keesing were recently donated to our collection by his wife Ella.

Surrey Hills Neighbourhood Centre has donated real estate brochures from the Highfield Estate.

Margaret Miller has donated the trophies memorabilia and records from the Camberwell District Ladies' Bowling Club.

MEETING REPORTS

24 June Bruce Postle "50 years of history through photography"

In 27 years as a photojournalist with *The* Age Bruce Postle has become one of Australia's most celebrated photojournalists. His talk was illustrated pictures taken by his father, also a photojournalist, and by many of his most famous pictures. Bruce discussed the circumstances behind each photograph and how he came to take them. Bruce's amazing memory of the details of each photograph and the stories behind them made this an entertaining and interesting talk. This event was so well attended that the venue had to be moved to the Parkview Room.

16 July Excursion to the Victorian Telecommunications Museum, 10.30 am 375 Burwood Rd Hawthorn

A group of CHS members visited the museum, which is housed in the Telstra Hawthorn Telephone Exchange near Glenferrie Station. The museum's aim is to preserve Australia's telecommunications heritage. The collection is very comprehensive and the guide used the collection to discuss the history of communication in Australia and where communication technology is heading in the future.

Aug 26 Annual General Meeting 8pm

The Society's Annual Meeting was held and the usual reports were presented. A proposition to increase the subscription rates to \$30 for a single member and \$40 for a family or corporate membership was made and agreed upon. The Committee was elected for 2014- 2015 and comprises: President; George Fernando; Secretary; Adèle Fernando-Swart; Acting Treasurer Ralph Cooray; Committee; Bryony Cosgrove. There are several vacancies on the Committee. If you are able to contribute to the Society by serving on the Committee please contact the Secretary.





Telstra Museum visit 16.7.14

NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following new members: Ralph Cooray, Dianne Gardiner, Jenny McArthur, Bruce Miller, and Janice Pleydell.

MEETINGS FOR 2014

All meetings will be held on the fourth Tuesday of each alternate month in the Meeting Room, Camberwell Library, 340 Camberwell Road, Camberwell at 8.00pm.

PLEASE NOTE THAT DUE TO UNFORSEEN CIRCUMSTANCES THE SEPTEMBER MEETING AND THE NOVEMBER MEETING SPEAKERS HAVE BEEN EXCHANGED.

Sep 23 Jane Nigro "The History of Malvern"

Jane Nigro, former President of the Malvern Historical Society, founded in 1972. Jane has been involved in many of Malvern's publications and she is the editor of the Society's newsletter. In 2005 Jane was awarded the City of Stonnington Citizen of the Year - Art/Culture in recognition of her work with the Malvern Historical Society. Jane works part time as a tutor at the Australian Catholic University where she is involved in early childhood and primary teacher training.

Oct 12 Excursion to the 19th Century Portable Iron Houses, South Melbourne, 2pm

These remarkable examples of early property development are among the few prefabricated iron buildings remaining in the world. Conducted by a National Trust tour guide, there will be a \$5 charge for this tour.

Nov 25 Anne Barton "Edmund Barton: the one man for the job"

Anne has researched the life of Sir Edmund Barton. He was a major contributor to the Federation movement through the 1890s and served as the first Prime Minister of Australia. He became a founding justice of the High Court of Australia in 1903.

Contributions to *Camberwell History* contain the opinions of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Camberwell Historical Society, its committee or members.

CAMBERWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC

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President — George Fernando; Secretary - Adèle Fernando-Swart; Treasurer - Ralph Cooray Committee members — Bryony Cosgrove Camberwell History: Editor — Adèle Fernando-Swart

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Camberwell History is printed in the office of Josh Frydenberg, MHR, Federal Member of Parliament for Kooyong