

Carlton Community History Group

Carlton Chronicles

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Frederick Oswald Barnett and the slums of Carlton

The photos on this page and the next are from a series taken by social reformer Frederick Oswald Barnett in the 1930s to highlight the slum conditions that existed in Carlton and other inner suburbs at the time. Through the use of photos like this, Barnett aimed to raise public awareness of inner-city poverty and the need for improved housing conditions for the poor.

Throughout his life, Barnett was influenced by the Christian socialist tradition of the Methodist Church. In 1923, shocked after a visit to a slum mission, he joined with a group of other young Methodists, which resulted in the foundation of the Methodist Baby Home in 1929. He had graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce from Melbourne University, and in 1931 completed a Master's degree with a thesis entitled "The Economics of the Slums" in which he correlated the physical condition of housing with the social condition of its residents. In 1934 Barnett formed a study group that held weekly meetings to receive and discuss papers about housing reform. This soon attracted the attention of the major evening newspaper *The Herald*. In 1935, a new government was elected in Victoria and, heavily influenced by Barnett's study group, established a Slum Abolition Committee. At the same time, Barnett and his group formed their own Housing Reform Council, which went on to become the Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board. The Board initially embarked on two initiatives - to conduct a survey of housing within a five-mile radius of the GPO, and to make recommendations to the government on rehousing persons displaced by slum reclamation schemes. In 1937, the Board reported to the State Government. Amongst other things, the report contained a list of slum landlords, which caused a storm of protest.

In 1937, the government was pressured into passing the Housing Act, which enabled the establishing of the Housing Commission of Victoria (HCV). The Commission, with a full-time Chairman and three part-time Commissioners, of which Barnett was one, met for the first time on 1 March 1938. The HCV proceeded to purchase land and



Barnett's notes attached to this photo say: "Carlton. Two mothers living in house shown in photograph 9. Both were under the influence of liquor. The doctor with me said that one baby had been very ill and had recovered, but now would die owing to neglect".

develop low-cost (low-rental) housing for the poor, with the first projects being in Carlton and Port Melbourne. The early years of the HCV were marked by conflicts between what the reformers were calling for and the social, economic and political realities. In February 1948, after repeatedly clashing with the Minister for Housing, Barnett declined reappointment to the HCV. In the years that followed he became a vocal opponent of the HCV's new multi-storey housing tower complexes.

For the remainder of his life, Barnett retained a strong interest in social reform. He remained an important figure in the Methodist Church, as a lay preacher and author of religious tracts. He also wrote several volumes of poetry and a book of revised nursery rhymes. He died at Box Hill on 3 May 1972. In the 1990s, an annual oration was instituted in his memory to acknowledge the

contribution he had made to eliminating poor housing conditions. The first F. Oswald Barnett Oration was delivered by Associate Professor Renate Howe of Deakin University at St Kilda on 21 October 1994.



Victoria's first policewomen

In July 1917, the Victorian Police Force appointed its first policewomen. Among the first three appointees was Mrs. Margaret Connor, known as Madge, an Irish woman then aged in her mid-40s, widowed and living in South Melbourne. During her twelve-year career as a police officer, her work among the "dissolute women" and neglected children of Melbourne's inner suburban slum areas often took her to Carlton. After retiring she spent her final years living at 14 Station Street, Carlton.



Margaret (Madge) Connor.
(Photo: Australian Dictionary of Biography.)

Before 1917, women were sometimes employed as police agents to gather evidence for prosecution in cases where the presence of a male police officer might not have been appropriate. But it was in 1917 that the first women were appointed as police officers. The early recruits did not wear a uniform and had no powers of arrest. Like the majority of women in employment at the time, they were paid less than their male counterparts. Their duties, as reported in *The Age* included:

".... the patrolling of wharfs and railway stations when long-distance steamers and trains arrive, in order to advise women and children when necessary. They will also patrol slum areas, where dissolute women will be looked after and neglected children assisted".

Policewomen saw the dark side of life in the inner suburbs - young women and girls forced into prostitution, drunkenness, domestic violence, abandoned babies and abused or neglected children. For example, in March 1923, Madge was tasked with finding the mother of a newborn baby who had been abandoned in Carlton. The mother had asked another woman to hold the baby for a few minutes, but then failed to return. Madge took

the baby to the Women's Hospital in Grattan Street, where a nurse recognised it as having been recently discharged. She was able to track down the unwed mother, Annie Nolan, at an address in Albert Park. The mother was arrested and charged with abandoning a child under the age of two. She was committed for trial by the Carlton Court, but was found not guilty in the Criminal Court a few weeks later.

In 1924, there were four policewomen in Victoria including Madge. For some time they had been campaigning for better pay and conditions for policewomen, and this came to fruition in November 1924, when they were sworn in as full members of Victoria Police. A report in the *Argus* newspaper gave more details of the changes:

Under the regulations, policewomen will have the power to make arrests, and will have similar hours, wages, pension rights, and working conditions as male police. They will wear uniform. If thought necessary by senior officers of the Police Department, policewomen will be authorised on special occasions to carry batons or revolvers, and will be trained in their use. (*Argus*, 13 November 1924).

After 12 years in the service, Madge was compulsorily retired at the age of 55. As she had not served the requisite 15 years as a sworn officer, she was not entitled to a police pension. She had to earn a living and found her niche as a private investigator. Within two weeks of her retirement, she began advertising her services as 'Investigations, divorce and all matters confidential nature' from an address in Northcote. She later opened a city office in Collins Street. Her last court appearance was in May 1951 when she gave evidence in a libel suit in the Supreme Court. She died at St Vincent's Hospital on 12 October 1952, aged about 78, and was farewelled with a requiem mass at Sacred Heart Church in Rathdowne Street, Carlton.

More information about Madge Connor and Victoria's first policewomen can be found on the CCHG's website at <http://www.cchg.asn.au/crime.html#madge>

Want to be involved?

Help fund the preservation of Carlton's history by becoming a financial member of the Carlton Community History Group. Membership includes advice and assistance with research enquiries.

Membership is \$20 per calendar year

A membership form is available at <http://www.cchg.asn.au/membership.pdf>

Pay by direct bank deposit, emailing your contact details and date of deposit to cchg@y7mail.com

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If you do not want to join but have stories, photos or information you think would be helpful, contact us via the email address above.

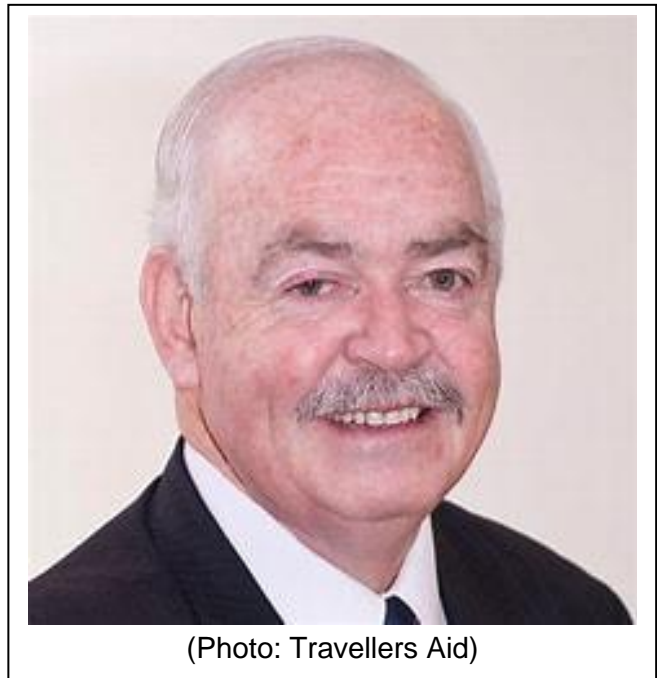
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Carlton personality - Trevor Huggard

On 19 September 2024, Carlton lost an important member of its community when Trevor Huggard died at the age of 80. Throughout his life, Trevor was committed to community action and the well-being the people of Carlton and Melbourne more generally. In the 1970s, he was involved in the campaign to have the unused railway land in Princes Hill turned into a Linear Park, and to have the former North Carlton railway station become a community resource, the North Carlton Railway Neighbourhood House. A major involvement was with the Princes Hill Community Centre, on whose committee of management he served for over 30 years from 1975 to 2017, including some 15 years as its President.



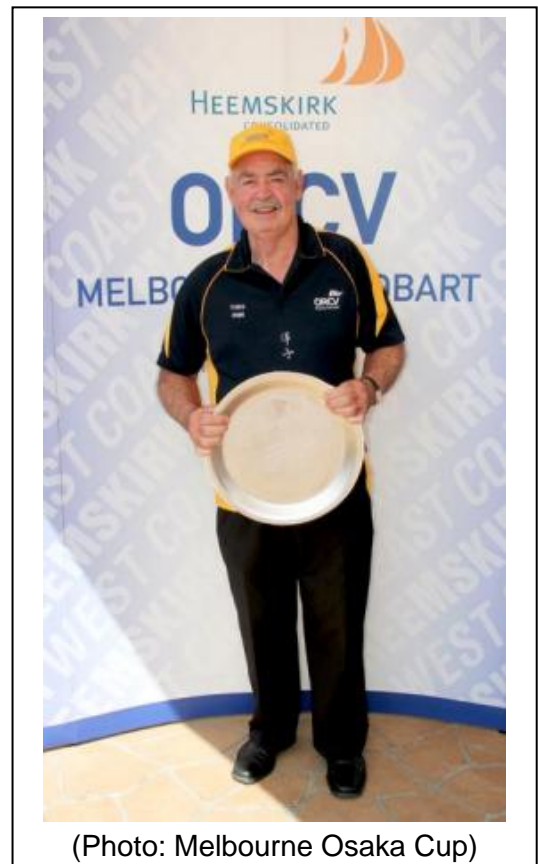
(Photo: Travellers Aid)

In his professional life, Trevor had his own company, Trevor Huggard & Associates, Consulting Engineers and Planners, which was established in 1972. This company, which specialised in historic buildings and structures, operated for over 40 years and in that period received 18 awards for excellence. He was the recipient of the Robin Boyd Award from the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, and was a long-standing consultant to the Historic Buildings Council of Victoria, Heritage Victoria, the National Trust of Australia, the National Estate, the Ministry of Housing and the Education Department of Victoria. He also lectured in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at Melbourne University for 15 years.

Trevor also had an active political career. He was a Councillor on the Melbourne City Council from 1982 to 1992, including a period as Lord Mayor of Melbourne. In 2015 he received the Order of Australia for significant service to the community through a range of roles with heritage conservation, cultural and sporting organisations.

Trevor was a passionate ocean racing yachtsman and the Inaugural Inductee into the Ocean Racing Club of Victoria's Hall of Fame. He competed in a record 37 consecutive Sydney to Hobart Yacht Races and over 150 International Blue Water Races around the world.

One of Trevor's passions was the rights of Aboriginal people. His father had pioneered housing and social improvement opportunities for Aboriginal communities over many decades, and he considered himself fortunate to have grown up closely associated with a large Aboriginal community. He was a founding member and long-serving board member of the Koorie Heritage Trust, which he had helped establish in 1985 with the aim of preserving and advancing south-eastern Australian Koorie culture, and providing opportunities for indigenous Koorie members.

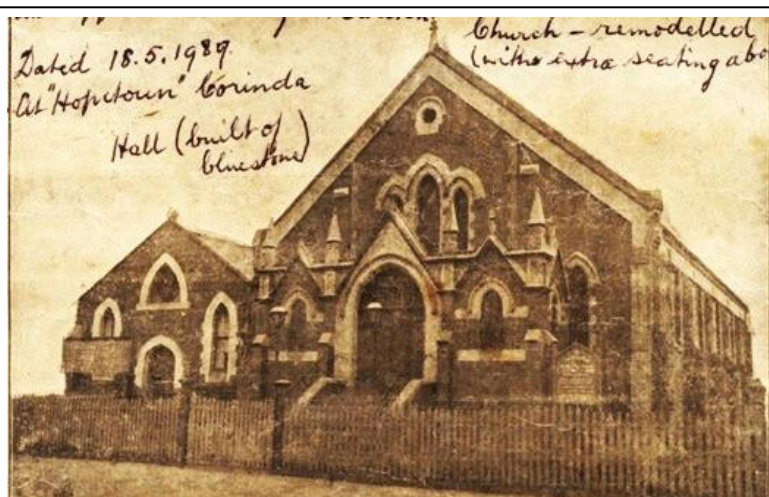


(Photo: Melbourne Osaka Cup)

A prominent corner site

The corner site bounded by Nicholson, Princes and Station streets, North Carlton, has had an interesting and checkered history. It was originally church land, granted to the Presbyterian Church in February 1870. Tenders for erection of a bluestone church were advertised in September 1870 and the foundation stone was laid a month later. But as the fledgling suburb of North Carlton developed in the 1870s, the Church Committee saw the need to accommodate its growing congregation. The foundation stone for the new Presbyterian Church was laid in February 1882. The old church building was subsequently used as a hall and Sunday School. In 1881 a brick house, comprising six rooms, bathroom and offices, was built in Princes Street as the manse and accommodation for Rev. Thomas McGregor.

In the late 1880s, the Presbyterian Church expanded its real estate holdings by building lease and rental properties to generate income. Four cottages each were built in Station and Nicholson streets, a house next door to the manse in Princes Street, and two shops on the corner of Nicholson and Princes streets. The shops hosted a variety of rental occupants – real estate agent, dealer, dairy produce store, bookseller, draper, undertaker, greengrocer, confectioner, baby health centre, a hostel for theology students and a café.



North Carlton Presbyterian Church (right) and Sunday School. (Image courtesy of Presbyterian Church of Victoria Archives).

Major changes took place in the 1960s and ownership of the land was transferred to the Presbyterian Church of Victoria Trusts Corporation in 1963. In March of that year, the European Australian Christian Fellowship (EACF) opened a café, known as “The Espresso Bar”, at 305 Nicholson Street. The shopfront later operated as headquarters for the EACF and provided English classes and outreach services to migrants. In late 1965 the North Carlton Presbyterian Church merged with the Carlton Methodist Mission and became the “Carlton Methodist Mission in co-operation with North Carlton Presbyterian Church”. The occasion was celebrated with a symbolic walk by Doug Tasker, minister of the North Carlton Presbyterian Church, leading the congregation up Neill Street to the Carlton Methodist Mission in Palmerston Street, Carlton. The inaugural combined service took place in January 1966, and the church was renamed Church of All Nations in 1967.

The vacant church building in Nicholson Street was demolished in 1972, ninety years after the memorial stone was laid in 1882. The former Sunday school and church hall building survived for over one hundred years, but a fire in the mid-1970s saw its

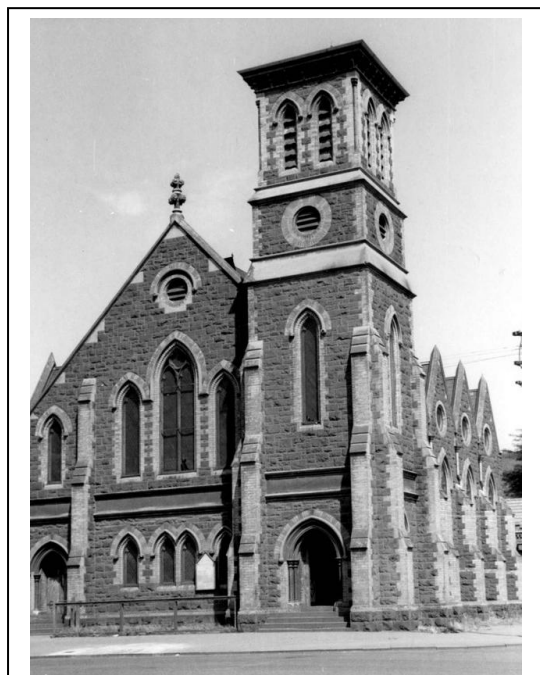


The tall Canary Island palm tree that stood out like a beacon on the corner of Nicholson and Princes streets has succumbed to disease and was removed in April 2026 for safety reasons. (Photo: CCHG)

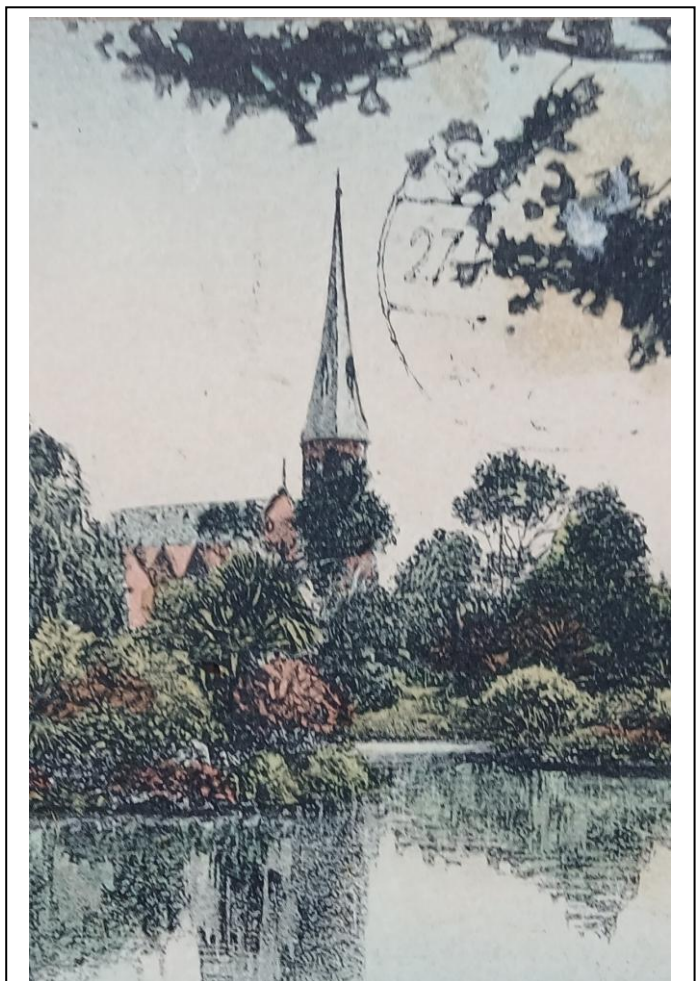
demise. Some of the buildings were in poor condition and subject to Housing Commission orders. In October 1974, a motion to sell the entire church site and buildings was passed by the Annual Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. In March 1975, literally a few days before the advertised auction, Premier Rupert (Dick) Hamer announced the government's decision to buy the site for development by the Social Welfare Department. Both shops, the house in Princes Street and one of the houses in Station Street were later demolished, but the remaining cottages escaped the ravages of the Housing Commission. They were used for youth employment programs and emergency accommodation. The land was acquired by the Roads Corporation (VicRoads) in May 1994, at the cost of \$862,000, and a portion of the Princes Street frontage was hived off for road widening. The only original church building that remains on the site is the former manse. It is now home to the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre at 20 Princes Street, North Carlton.

Scene in the Carlton Gardens

In 1910, a colour postcard was available showing a small lake in the northwest corner of the Carlton Gardens (photo right). In the background is the spire of the Erskine Presbyterian Church, on the south corner of Grattan and Rathdowne Streets. Given the culture of the times, it is not surprising that the scene is rendered almost as if it is an English village. Today the scene is very different. The trees and vegetation have changed radically, while the lake was long converted into a children's playground. The Erskine Church has also disappeared. The spire featured in the postcard was demolished in 1925 as unsafe, leaving a solid tower (photo left). The church itself was never completed, with the rear sanctuary being a small temporary affair. After having been used as a Greek Orthodox Church during the 1960s, the Erskine Church was demolished in 1971 for an office block, the Greek Church having moved to its own purpose-built site on Lygon St Carlton North. *(With thanks to Peter Tilley for making the postcard available).*



(Photo: John T. Collins courtesy State Library of Victoria).



(Image from postcard supplied by Peter Tilley)