

Carlton Community History Group

Carlton Chronicles

Issue No. 42

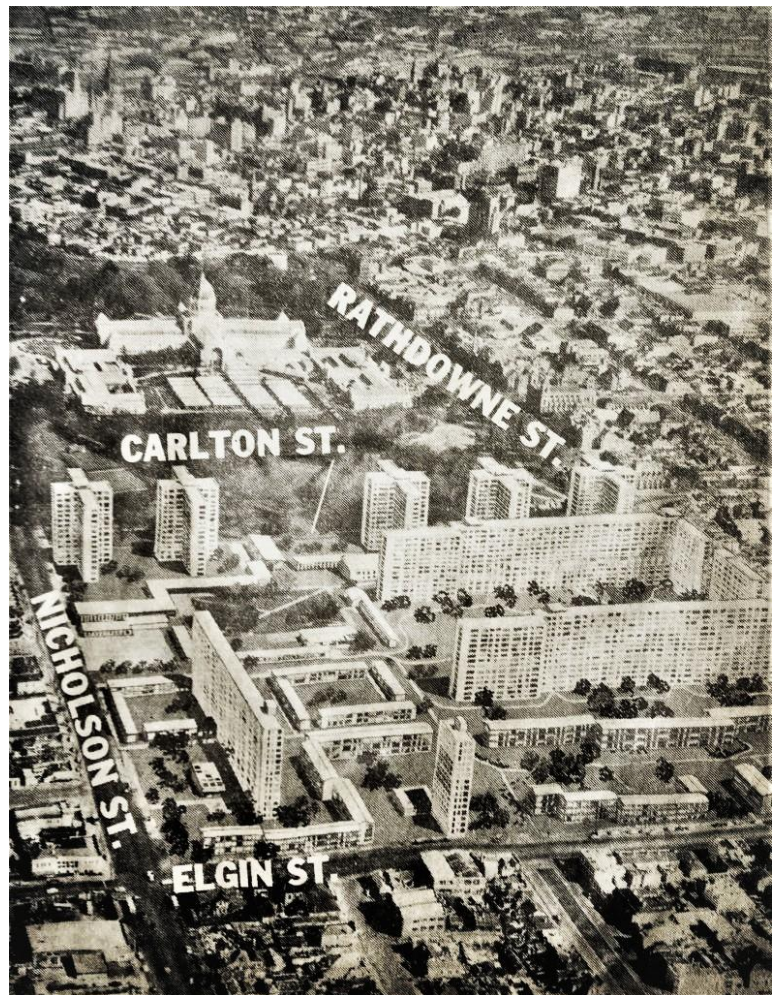
September 2026

Slum clearance in Carlton

In the early decades of the 20th century, Carlton was regarded as an area of slums. Many people in the inner suburbs were indeed living under appalling conditions, and social reformers such as Oswald Barnett (see previous issue, June 2026) and the media created increasing pressure on the State Government to do something about it. In response, the government in 1938 established the Housing Commission of Victoria, one of whose aims was to clear these slums and replace them with clean modern affordable housing for those affected. The Commission's work was however interrupted by the Second World War. Immediately after the war there was an acute housing shortage in Melbourne, which meant that it had to focus on the construction of affordable housing in what was then the outer suburbs. It was not until the 1960s that the Housing Commission was able to turn its attention to clearing the slum in the inner suburbs, including in Carlton.

A number of proposals were put forward as to how this should be done. One of the more alarming of these is shown in this illustration from *The Herald* newspaper of 6 March 1958. It involved the

demolition and clearing of the whole area from Carlton Street in the south to Elgin Street in the north, and from Nicholson Street to Rathdowne Street. This area would be demolished and replaced by a large, modern housing estate as shown. Fortunately, this proposal did not go ahead. The actual clearances that were carried out in the 1960s were a few blocks north of this. If this proposal had gone



(Photomontage by Noel O'Connor and Carl Hammerschmidt, published in *The Herald*, 6 March 1958).

ahead, we would have lost Murchison Square, Macarthur Square and all the lovely old historic houses around them.

Another proposal, which was partially implemented, appeared in a 1968 report for the Housing Commission by consultants Leslie M. Perrott & Partners. This involved demolishing an area of Carlton from Grattan St in the south to Fenwick or Macpherson Street in North Carlton, and from Swanston Street in the east to Nicholson Street in the west. This was an area at least ten times the size of that shown in the 1958 illustration in *The Herald*. Much of the southern part of this area was in fact demolished in the 1960s, but fortunately community resistance meant that it was stopped before it went too far north, and North Carlton was saved from destruction.

Do you have connections with South-west Carlton?

Carlton Community History Group is currently working with the History Workshop at Melbourne University to undertake detailed research of a small area in the south-west of Carlton. This is the area immediately south of the University bounded by Grattan, Swanston, Victoria and Elizabeth Streets. It contains Lincoln Square, University Square, Bouverie Street, Leicester Street and part of Queensberry Street. A particular focus of this research is the working-class population that used to live in the area but was largely displaced by commercial buildings and later by the expansion of the University into the area.



This is what Swanston Street in Carlton looked like in the early 1870s. The street was then known as Madeline Street, and the photo (which is looking towards the City Baths) shows the west side of the street, just north of Queensberry Street. (Photo: Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW).

If you have family or other connections with this area, the Carlton Community History Group would like to hear from you. Email us at cchg@y7mail.com

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 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

BSB: 06-3014

Account Number: 10198637

Name of account: Carlton Community History Group

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.

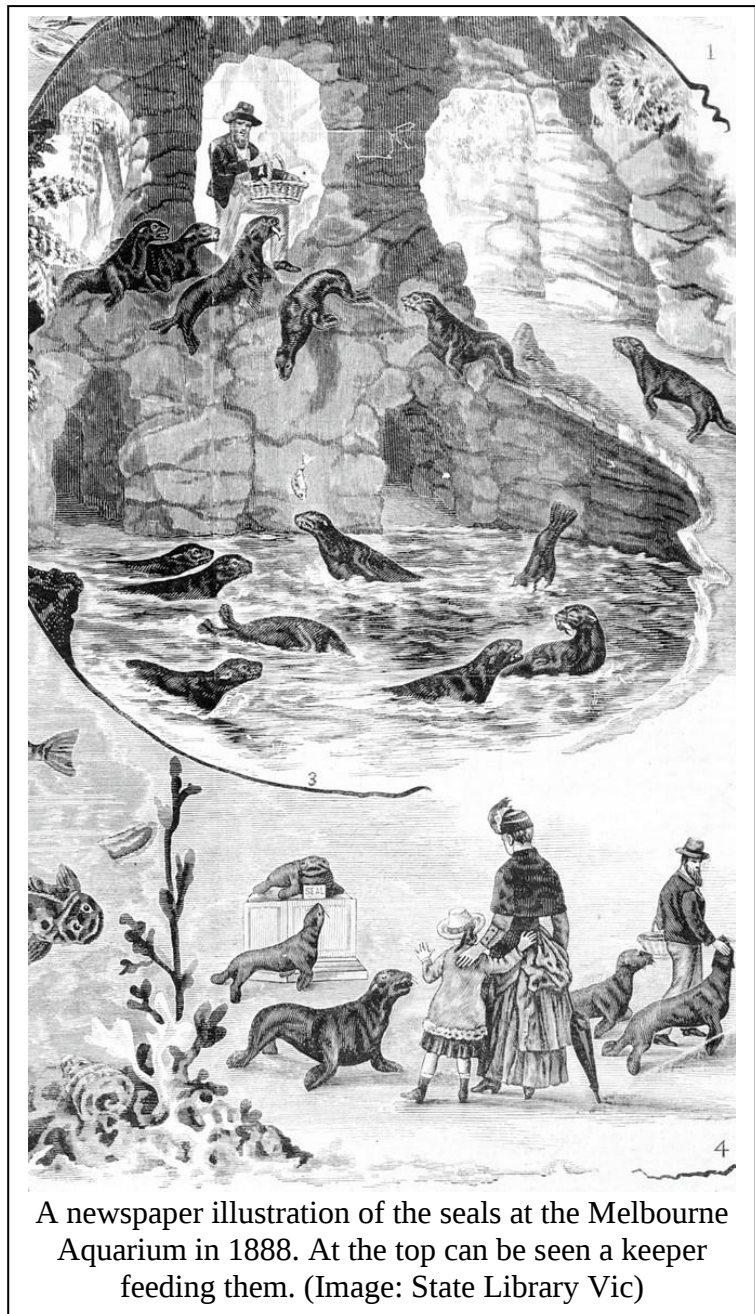
Adventures of an aquarium keeper

From 1885 till 1953, the Exhibition Building in Carlton (now the Royal Exhibition Building) housed Melbourne's only public aquarium. When originally built, the Exhibition Building had two large wings attached to its north-west and north-east corners. The north-east wing housed the Aquarium, which as well as fish, kept seals, crocodiles and even monkeys.

James Machray was for many years a keeper and superintendent at the Aquarium. He was also a local resident, living in Station Street, North Carlton. When he retired in May 1925 after 40 years in the job, Mr. Machray was interviewed by *The Herald* newspaper and shared some stories of his time at the Aquarium including the fact that he had been bitten by crocodiles, monkeys and seals.

"A black monkey, named Peter Felix after the coloured boxer of that name, used to be a great friend of mine. One Sunday morning when I was about to feed him, he jumped at me. I knocked him off, but he came again. I grabbed him by the throat. Like a Collingwood push, the rest of the monkeys attacked me. I spent the next six weeks in hospital. Seals can be appealed to through their stomachs. It is no use beating them if they bite you, because they will never forgive you. The alligators are dead as logs one moment and as quick as lightning the next. We have had to forcibly feed them, as otherwise they would never eat. One meal a month is enough for them, although they get more than that. By tapping them on the nose and tickling them under the jaw we could get them to open their jaws so wide that we were able to throw huge pieces of meat down."

James Machray lived in retirement at his home in North Carlton until his death in July 1934, aged 87. The Aquarium continued to operate until 29 January 1953 when it was destroyed by a massive fire that almost consumed the historic Royal Exhibition Building as well. The seals, which had been a major attraction, escaped the fire, thanks to the efforts of volunteers from the on-looking crowd who coaxed them from the water. The Aquarium was so badly damaged it was never re-built.



A newspaper illustration of the seals at the Melbourne Aquarium in 1888. At the top can be seen a keeper feeding them. (Image: State Library Vic)

Carlton personalities - Zhao family, Princes Hill shopkeepers

Huang Yi Wei and Zhao Dong Ming and their young baby Justin arrived in Princes Hill in 2001 as the new owners of a milk bar business. Known to customers as Annie and Tony, the couple became part of a long tradition of food providers at 577 Lygon Street, Princes Hill. The first business had been Thomas Parkes' grocery in 1890, followed by a succession of confectioners from 1915 to 1974. These included Eastern European Jewish confectionery shops. The last of these closed a few years after the Kadimah Jewish Cultural Centre, only blocks away, moved to Elsternwick in 1965. By the 1990s the shop was being run by Greek migrants as a milk bar.

Yi Wei and Dong Ming had already lived in Australia for ten years when they bought the Princes Hill milk bar. Each had come from China to study English but with no plans to stay. When civil unrest in China in 1989 led to the events on Tiananmen Square, the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke offered asylum to Chinese students studying in Australia. Both decided to stay. Yi Wei worked in small clothing factories in the inner suburbs of Melbourne. Pay was irregular and conditions poor until she found work with the Jewish-owned company Glo-Weave in Fitzroy. Dong Ming was sent to work in Mildura in the labour-intensive grape picking and drying industry. He found work in Melbourne when the couple married.

Yi Wei and Dong Ming's prior work experience had been in a State-run communist economy. They now needed to plan for a secure future together in a mixed market economy. People in the long-established Melbourne Chinese-Australian community were willing to help, but there was a language barrier. The main Chinese language spoken in Melbourne in the 1990s was Cantonese, the language spoken in the South China region of China. Yi Wei and Dong Ming came from Shanghai in the East China region and spoke Shanghaiese and Mandarin but did not speak nor understand Cantonese.

Good advice came from a Chinese friend who had migrated from capitalist Hong Kong. He suggested they follow the example of the Lebanese, Greek and Italian migrants and become independent business owners. Yi Wei and Dong Ming set about getting experience, working for no pay in different family businesses - a fish and chip shop, a chicken fast food shop, a newsagent and a milk bar. They worked in different locations - Seddon, Collingwood, Ferntree Gully and Geelong. Then they saw an advertisement for a milk bar in Lygon Street, Princes Hill, and decided this was the one to buy. Family and friends helped them with finance.

Yi Wei and Dong Ming became indispensable for locals. Open from 7am to 10 pm, they were always there. The business delivered to the homes of elderly Princes Hill residents. They adjusted to changing community tastes, replacing milk shakes with coffee and selling Fair Trade and organic coffee. After twenty-five years, on the first of July 2026, the couple sold their business and retired. Their son Jason had finished his studies at Melbourne University and was working as a doctor. The new owners continue the long tradition of 577 Lygon Street, Princes Hill as a food provider.



Huang Yi Wei, Zhao Dong Ming and their son Justin in the shop in Lygon Street, Princes Hill. (Photo supplied).

Early beginnings of history group

This year is the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Carlton Community History Group. Long-time member Felice Rocca reflects on its early days.

It was very early in 2006, maybe even at the end of 2005, that a friend mentioned that there was a public notice in the Rathdowne Street Library for people interested in getting together to work on the history of Carlton. The working name at that stage was “Local History Group” and the notice was put up by Judith Biddington. This was not, however, the first such group. In the early 1990s the “Carlton History Group” ran a series of talks out of the old Rathdowne Street library. One such talk was by the noted author Arnold Zable. This group in turn involved many of the people - Pat Grimshaw, Katie Holmes and Marian Turnbull amongst others – from “The Carlton Forest Project” who from 1987-88 were responsible for the production of the six booklets “Among the Terraces”, which covered aspects of Carlton History.

There were of course others working on other topics concerning Carlton. Lee Street Primary School gathered much historical material during the 1980s. In 1992, the Jewish Museum of Australia, the Italian Historical Society (Co.As.It) and the Museum of Victoria combined to mount a major exhibition, “Bridging Two Worlds: Jews, Italians and Carlton”, with an excellent if too short booklet. And it was in 2004 that the Carlton Residents Association sponsored the publication of the 570-page book “Carlton: A history” (edited by Peter Yule) which provided still more detailed background.

However, history I still believe, is never complete, so in 2006 I went to that initial meeting, and out of that was the beginning of the Carlton Community History Group.



The Carlton Library in Rathdowne Street in 1996 before it was rebuilt and expanded.
(Photo: Felice Rocca)

The origin of house and terrace names

At 751-67 Rathdowne Street is a terrace row of one storey cottages, with fair size front gardens and elevated above the footpath by a half dozen or so steps up to the curved roof verandas. The name of the terrace is in the raised triangular nameplate spanning the fourth and fifth cottages - Montpelier Terrace. This name could be

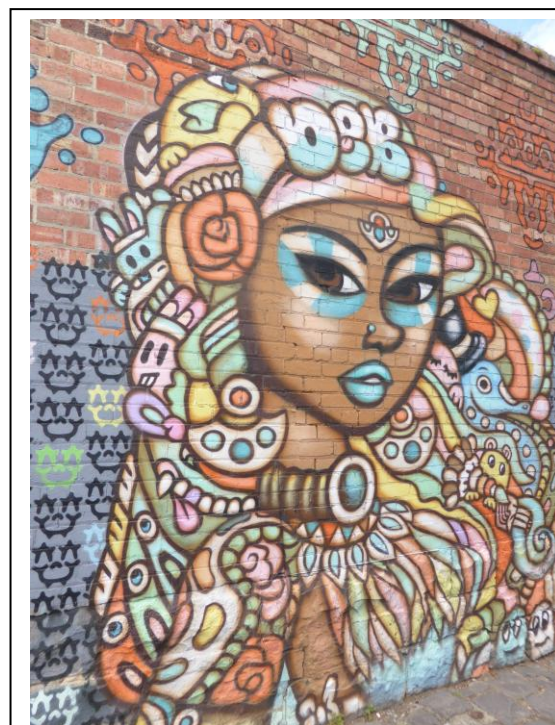


Montpelier Terrace, Rathdowne Street, North Carlton.
(Photo: Felice Rocca)

a recollection of fashionable nineteenth century travel to the south of France - but in that case the name is actually misspelt. The town in southern France is “Montpellier” with two ls. Moreover, the terrace name may not have come directly from the French town but from “Montpelier” (with one l) in the town of Brighton, England. Brighton itself became a popular resort in the early 1800s, and developed rapidly; in 1822 a rural track was redeveloped and named Montpelier Road (with one l) and a year later along that road, “Montpelier Terrace” was commenced. Today “Montpelier is an inner suburban area of Brighton it forms a high-class, architecturally cohesive residential district with an exceptionally complete character” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montpelier, Brighton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montpelier,_Brighton)). There is still more to discover about Carlton terrace names, and even otherwise obvious connections may have a detour along the way.

Street Art in Carlton

The photo below left shows a painting that is on the wall of the Museo Italiano in Faraday Street, Carlton, representing a woman leaving her homeland on a ship for a distant land. The painting on the right used to be on a wall in a laneway in Princes Hill, but is no longer there. These are just two of the many interesting works of art that can be found in the streets of Carlton. Andrew Athanasopoulos, an avid recorder and collector of such street art, has photographed thousands of them over the years, including some that no longer exist. A presentation of some of the best of this collection, with commentary from Andrew, has been produced by the CCHG and is available on its website at <http://www.cchg.asn.au/publications.html#zoom> **You can enjoy these remarkable works of art at your leisure by simply going to the website and clicking on the link to the presentation.**



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