

## Freeman's Livery Stables

In 1912 a handsome new building appeared on Drummond Street, Carlton, between Elgin and Faraday Streets, opposite the police station and just south of the courthouse. With a distinctive tower and a horse's head on the façade, it was the new home of Freeman's Livery Stables which had already been operating on that site for ten years in a ramshackle collection of buildings. Henry Freeman was the proprietor, but his brother Alfred was also important in the running of the business.

Designed by architect W.H. Webb, the new structure provided a large stabling area of 40 or 50 stalls and a separate space next door for coachbuilding. Upstairs at one end of the building was Freeman's hall, a large area where for the next few decades dances and meetings were frequently held. On the upper floor at the northern end of the building the design included a large and comfortable apartment for the family, with a separate entrance from the street and a brass plaque bearing the dwelling's name, *Brandiston*. In the 1970s the building became famous as the Pram Factory, a centre for innovative theatre for some ten years until it was sold in 1980 and demolished to make way for Lygon Court, a shopping and cinema complex.



Image: Courtesy of Peter J. Keenan

### **The Pram Factory in Drummond Street Carlton (Photographed by Peter J. Keenan in February 1976)**

Henry Freeman was a young man in a hurry. In 1884 at the age of 18, while operating farm machinery on a property near St Arnaud, he had suffered a disastrous accident which resulted in the amputation of fingers on his left hand. According to a family story, he was already engaged to be married but the father of his intended refused to allow the match to go ahead on the grounds that Henry would not now be able to

provide adequately for a wife and family. A massive misjudgement, as it turned out. Angry and challenged, Henry returned to Collingwood where he had grown up. Within four years he had married Elizabeth Isabella Jury Clark and was running a fruit shop in Hoddle Street. Their only child, Herbert Henry Freeman, was born in 1890. In 1893 there was the first sign of what was to come when Henry briefly ran livery stables at 57 Johnston Street, Fitzroy. In the years to the end of the century he was associated with woodyards and stables in Elgin Street, between Rathdowne and Drummond Streets, and with similar businesses described as being 'off 304 Lygon Street', presumably with no street frontage. By 1902, however, his stables were permanently located in Drummond Street where the family was to trade for close to sixty years.<sup>1</sup>

The business was a very varied one. In the early days the Freemans ran horse-drawn bus services and one route was to the Warrandyte gold diggings. It was necessary to stop every seven miles to change horses, first at the Old England Hotel in Heidelberg and then at the Templestowe Hotel. Carriage building was important too. But the core of the business was the provision of stabling to many of the big businesses in the area, including Ball & Welch, a large department store in Faraday Street, as well as to smaller cab operators.

"Up to 30 carriage builders, wheelwrights, blacksmiths and stable hands were employed and many of these helped construct the building itself ... Drummond Street was busy, but Freeman's Stables was the busiest point, for it was open day and night servicing the cabbies who hired their horses and hansom cabs there. It was the forerunner of a modern taxi base and, in later years, motor cars were hired as well as the wide range of horse-drawn vehicles which were also made on the premises. Ernie Chandler started work as a cabbie out of Freeman's Stables in 1924, paying Alfred Freeman five shillings a day ... The horse-drawn cabs had a reprieve during the second world war when petrol rationing forced the motor cabs off the road at midnight; the horses would then take over. Bobby Patterson was a young cabbie at the time and gleefully recalls picking up the lucrative trade in stranded Yank soldiers and sailors at five pounds a head."<sup>2</sup>

Many members of Henry Freeman's extended family were involved in the business. His son Herbert, born in 1890, completed a carriage-building apprenticeship, but he was fascinated by all things mechanical and about 1910 told his father that he was leaving the family business to become a mechanic. Famously his father replied that he was making a big mistake. 'The motor car will never replace the horse.' He was full of business confidence at this time, as is clear from his decision to rebuild, but in fact the writing was already on the wall for horse-drawn vehicles. Henry was close to his youngest brother Alfred, who had worked in the stables from the beginning and it was he who took over the business in 1923 when Henry, now a wealthy man, withdrew to concentrate on his many other interests in property and finance. By 1926, ownership of the land too had passed to Alfred but in 1928 he died and the stables were then managed by his son Albert.

By the 1930s demand for the services provided by Freeman's Stables was certainly falling and from 1935 Walter Freeman, youngest son of Alfred and brother of Albert, was operating a motor garage in the stables building. Henry, who died in 1946, was still alive to see this development. From about 1940 Walter's family occupied the apartment called *Brandiston* where previously his uncle Henry and then his father Alfred had lived with their families. It was large and very comfortable. The entrance was quite grand

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<sup>1</sup>1893 is the first year in which Henry appears in business directories as associated with stables. However, "ESTAB. 1890" is clearly visible on a photograph of the original stable building in Drummond Street.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Garner in *Perambulator*, the Australian Performing Group newsletter, April 1980.

with a red carpet and a lovely timber banister. There were cornices and fireplaces and a bay window over the lane at the northern end. For the children concerned, the stables provided a wonderful playground but were not without their dangers. Heather Jones, Walter Freeman's daughter, had a nasty accident in the 1940s when she was about four and playing in the area where huge bags of chaff were stored. Her uncle Albert was feeding the chaff into a hopper, which connected to a manger in the stables below. Somehow she fell into the hopper and down into the manger, to the amazement of the horse, which reared up neighing in alarm. She had just had the first fillings to her teeth and her head was so jarred by the fall that the fillings had to be replaced. Her parents were not happy about this expense.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s the two businesses continued. When the film *On the Beach* (released in 1959) was being shot in Melbourne, Freemans provided the horse and driver for a scene where a car was being towed because petrol was no longer available. With demand falling, space in the building was let to other businesses and in 1939 Paramount Prams had become a tenant. Eventually its proprietor George Coulson acquired the property and in the late 1950s the death knell came when he decided to get rid of the horses. According to Albert's nephew John, his uncle, after running the stables for so many years, was heartbroken and died soon afterwards. His brother Walter expanded his garage into the stables area but by 1963 he too was dead. Another automotive business followed his but after sixty years on the site and fifty in their own building, the Freeman connection with Drummond Street was finished. Not so the building itself which shot to fame in the 1970s as the Pram Factory, the home of dynamic new theatre in Melbourne, until it was replaced in the early 1980s by the Lygon Court complex.

***CCHG thanks the Freeman Family for sharing their story.***