

“The Jewel in the Crown”

The Story of the Crown Jewel Estate in Ringwood East

High on the hill, on the eastern side of Mt Dandenong Road, just north of the Maroondah Hospital, is a group of suburban streets. Those streets, and the occupants of their 86 original lots, share a link with an intriguing past.

If only they know! If only they cared!

Those streets, Mirabel Avenue, Valda Avenue and what are now the southern portions of Evon Avenue and Velma Grove, were once known as the “Crown Jewel Estate”. Few people would now know the area by this title, which was first bestowed by its ambitious subdivider in 1926 “because it CROWNS a glorious height 550 feet above sea level, overlooking all adjoining estates, and is the CROWNING JEWEL of them all”.

But let us first go back a few years earlier, to May 1884 in fact when George Smart, of Bulleen Road Kew, brickmaker, bought the 23 acres one rood and twenty nine and three tenths perches (23A 1R 29 3/10 P) or 9.4834 hectares from Arthur Bailey Clements of Ringwood for the sum of £600 “sterling”.

In those days of course Mt Dandenong Road ran between the fledgling settlements of Ringwood (then centred near what is today the Maroondah Highway) and Croydon (then known as South Warrandyte). As the villages took root, so to speak, so too would the demand for bricks, not only for house building but also for manufacture of kilns and associated early infrastructure.

Upon the death of George Smart in 1889 the land was transferred by his Executors to Elenor Leah Harvie of Power Street Hawthorn in January 1891. Elenor Harvie soon disposed of it, in June 1891, when it was acquired by Charles Meyland of Bulleen Road Kew, Landscape Gardener.

Two aspects are relevant here. Firstly, Meyland's address (Bulleen Road Kew) was the same as Smart's. Were they known to each other? Were they neighbours? Indeed, were they (and possibly Elanor Harvie) related?

Secondly, it marked the arrival in Ringwood East of the Meyland family, who would play a prominent role as orchardists in the locality for the next 70 years.

Charles Meyland owned the land until his death in March 1909, following which the Curator of the Estates of Deceased Persons sold it in March 1913 to Herbert Edward Watson.

The Watson Years

Herbert Edward Watson's address was Oxford Road Ringwood, Oxford Road being the earlier name for Mt Dandenong Road. His occupation was shown as orchardist. It is probable he took over the land after it had been planted out as an orchard by Charles Meyland.

And this is where the intriguing story of the Crown Jewel Estate comes in, and how its history over the next 40 years reflected the history and development of Ringwood.

The early 1920s saw the electrification of the railway line between Ringwood and Lilydale which coincided with, indeed was the catalyst for, much growth and speculative development of the locality, with the Borough of Ringwood being carved out of the western portion of the Shire of Lillydale in 1924.

They were years in which orchards and farms fell prey to property developers – in fact speculators – who in a few short years in the 1920s brought to the market so much land sufficient to meet demand for many many years to come.

So it was that Herbert Edward Watson's orchard was cleared, subdivided (in the rudimentary standard of the time) and offered for sale.

And did not sell.

The Crown Jewel Estate boasted 84 large building allotments, "all elevated and perfectly drained" on terms of £10 deposit, £1 per month, balance in 5 years with interest at 6%. Buyers were urged to "Buy Now and Take the Profits".

The agent for the sale was T Burkitt, Box 12 Ringwood and the vendor's solicitor was Russell Bona and Russell of Melbourne and Ringwood. This incidentally was where Bona Street, nearby, derived its name.

The great irony however of the Crown Jewel Estate is that the Vendor of the Estate was not shown as Herbert Edward Watson but as "A. Marshall Miller, McDonald Street Mordialloc". But Title never went out of Watson's name. How did that happen?

The Role of A. Marshall Miller

It would appear an agreement was struck between Watson and Alfred Marshall Miller "formerly of Mordialloc but now of Ringwood, farmer" and Patrick Francis O'Collins, solicitor of Melbourne, whereby Miller would subdivide Watson's land, using finance provided from one James Mills and presumably pay off Watson from the sale proceeds.

Such arrangements were somewhat free and easy. Today the concept of a subdivider selling on terms blocks in a subdivision of land he did not even own could not even be contemplated or allowed.

But in 1925 and 1926 it was contemplated. It did proceed with conspicuous lack of success.

One lot sold in April 1927 (Lot 37 for £110). Another sold in December 1927 (Lot 3 for £135). Eight parcels, comprising about 14 lots, sold during the entire 1930s, and then only one further block, in 1942, until sales resumed after the end of the War.

There is a pattern to these sales. Marshall Miller generally sold the few blocks he managed to dispose of at prices of about £100 to £110 per block, with the transfers to the new owners (being "Transfers by Direction" from Watson to the new owners, so that Marshall Miller's

name never appeared on the Title) showing that Marshall Miller in turn paid Watson £44 from the proceeds of each sale.

This, then was the arrangement. Marshall Miller would carry out the subdivision and would market the land, with Watson being entitled to perhaps a fixed amount of £44 per block as each block settled, by way of payment by Marshall Miller for his purchase on terms of Watson's orchard.

But it did not work out.

In the meantime H.E. Watson took action against Marshall Miller in 1931 and 1932 for "default under Contract of Sale" from him with Watson's solicitor charging him £40 for "lengthy negotiations throughout a complicated matter" in unscrambling what had become a fine mess.

The land therefore reverted to Watson and with the on set of the Depression and the later on set of World War II became virtually unsaleable.

The real loss, however, as recounted by Mr Watson's daughter Vera Wigley in 2003, was that Marshall Miller cleared the orchard of the trees. For the twenty years until the land started selling again from 1946 Watson was unable to work the land. His orchard had gone.

After The War

Sales picked up from 1946 as the land met a ready market from returned servicemen for home sites, albeit with no roads, no water, no sewer and no gas.

The prevailing price was £60 per block (about half the price Marshall Miller was occasionally achieving twenty years earlier) with 44 lots being sold through the agency of C.E. Carter in 1946 and 1947. The area gradually developed, taking advantage of its views ("Mirabel" Avenue gives a clue to the beauty of the aspect) and becoming in its day, and even now, one of the most keenly sought parts of Ringwood East.

But who remembers its troubled birth? A few more, as a result of these notes, I hope.

Richard Carter
January 2004