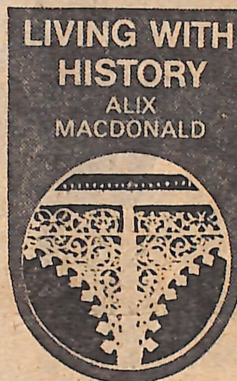




Robin Boyd Hall.

ABOVE: The former Congregational Church and hall, and Dr. James Barrett's house, all in Howe Crescent, South Melbourne.

BELOW: The interior of the former Congregational Church, Howe Crescent, South Melbourne.



Doctor's home geared for a big practice

Dr. James Barrett, a busy and conscientious medical practitioner of the second half of the 19th century, had a practice extending over several suburbs, so he kept a team of "fast trotting horses" in order to cover the area.

It is not surprising that the house that Barrett built in Howe Crescent, South Melbourne (then known as Emerald Hill), had extensive stabling.

Only one of the wooden stable blocks — there are said to have been two — survives but Barrett's house, a solid, well-proportioned exercise in the Italian style, without frills, seems likely to be preserved for some generations to come.

Restored, and with some internal alterations, it is now the offices of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Victorian Chapter) which has also bought the two buildings adjoining it along the curve of Howe Crescent.

Of these, the more notable is the triple-fronted Congregational Church, built in 1874-5 to seat 650 people, in what was obviously a thriving parish. Between the church and the house is the church hall, which matches the church in its brown and yellow brick facade, and is being refurbished inside by the institute to provide a space for lectures and meetings. It's an appropriate use since the hall seems to have been used as a school more than once in the 19th century.

Taken together, the three buildings make a spectacular townscape, and between them illustrate the "battle of the styles" — classical against Gothic — that raged through much of the architecture of the Victorian period.

House surgeon

The architects have named Barrett's house Russell House, after Robert Russell, Victoria's earliest architect but for most of its life the house has been associated with the medical profession.

James Barrett himself arrived in Victoria in 1858, as medical officer on a migrant ship (he had formerly been resident medical officer at the Middlesex Hospital), and was soon appointed house surgeon to the Lying-in Hospital (later the Women's).

After a few years he began general practice at Bank Street West, Emerald Hill. He appears to have moved to Howe Crescent around the period 1868-71. The date the house was built is not certain but Dr. Barrett was to remain at this address until his death in 1908.

James Barrett and his wife, Catherine (who died young), had nine children, the eldest of whom was later to become distinguished as Sir James Barrett, a doctor notable, among other

things, for his association with the Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital and with the Victorian Bush Nursing Association.

Sir James was also to become Vice-Chancellor and Chancellor of Melbourne University and over his last 40 years or so of life — he died in 1945 — lectured and wrote on subjects ranging from typhoid fever to the Imperial alliance and proportional representation.

Two other Barrett boys and a daughter, Edith, became doctors. In about 1920, Dr. Edith Barrett sold the practice at 30 Howe Crescent to Dr. T. J. K. Whittam, whose daughters, Yvonne and Pat, remember their life there with much affection.

"It always had atmosphere," Miss Yvonne Whittam recalled. "The front room was a ballroom and we had our coming out dance there, with fairy lights in the garden."

Pigeon loft

The Howe Crescent house was built in at least two stages. In both the Barrett and Whittam eras it had attractive gardens and some of the old trees remain. The gabled stable building looks on to a cobbled yard and has traces of having once been used as a pigeon loft.

The front of the house is symmetrical, with a projecting, pillared portico on to the street. The ground floor rooms also project, creating open balconies on either side of the entrance section. The balconies seem more for appearance than use, since they have access only through windows. The windows themselves are double-hung sashes using chains instead of cords.

Inside, the architects for the restoration, Whitford and Peck, have created an interior of plain white walls, violet carpet and orange furniture, which would no doubt come as a considerable shock to Dr. James Barrett if he were to return to see it, but they have retained such original features as the generous cornices of the front rooms and the plain, graceful staircase.

Of the other buildings, the more interesting is the church, the interior of which is not really classical or Gothic or anything but itself. Shallow arches and curves seem to set its style. The ceiling over the main space is curved and supported by arches carried on iron columns.

A gallery runs around three sides and its wings have the odd characteristic that they slope to match the rake of floor, giving the impression that the congregation sitting there could be in danger of sliding down towards the pulpit. The gallery has a cast iron balustrade, recalling the lacey verandahs of houses in the district.

Just how the institute will use the church hasn't been decided, but no doubt it will come within the scope of the words on the plaque which was erected at Russell House when the Governor (Sir Rohan Delacombe) dedicated it: "These headquarters are dedicated to serving the people of Victoria by encouraging co-operation, creativity and progress in every field of planning and construction."

