

## John Stevens Gawler

How can I do justice to my father's long and very productive life in a brief talk? 1  
The more research I did, the more difficult the job became. Still I will attempt to convey his major accomplishments as well as possible.

My grandparents, John and Kate Gawler, set off for Australia in 1886 with their first born son, also John, 8 months old, another child on the way and a comfortable amount of cash. The passage by sailing ship took 3 months and on arrival grandfather bought land at Black Rock, built a house and invested his money in a drycleaning business. Then came the land boom of 1888 and the collapse of almost everything including his investment. Being without much vocational training he took a clerical job; enough for a frugal existence but not much more. So my father and his younger brother Harold got an early introduction to scrimping and saving, but did have the advantage of living in seaside bushland. Their father was not a great provider but he took the boys on long bush walks and gave them an excellent grounding in "moral fibre".

The boys built a sailing boat and got into trouble with local fishermen for selling undersized fish. One of them declared "you will live to be hung" [Pity I did not know that when I was causing problems as a teenager]; they also collected bottles washed up on the beach, to supplement the family budget.

At the age of 12, my father [hereafter referred to as John] had developed an interest in houses and set his sights on becoming an Architect- a tall order as the going arrangement was for Architects to be paid "Tutillage" of anything up to 500 pounds for the apprentice to work without pay for 3 or 4 years before receiving a "Certificate of Competency"

So John's first job was as office boy to a real estate agent which included collecting rents and having a good look at the subject houses. Then he had a stroke of luck in the form of an Architect who took him on without the usual fee! In those days there were no typewriters, no cars and no means of duplicating plans. The juniors started each day by "rubbing up" the India Ink sticks to make the day's supply of ink. Parties to building contracts signed the original drawings which then became the contract document. Builders then paid the juniors to trace copies for use on the job, while everyone else went to the Architect's office to refer to the originals! During this period, John attended night classes at the Working Men's College, mainly in drawing, and commuted from Black Rock [a 3 mile walk to catch the steam train]. This obviously helped him win the under 18 five mile walking championship of Victoria [he also played lacrosse and cricket].

At the age of 22 John had his qualification and took a two year contract in Canton, China [a Geelong firm working for a mission]. This brought him face to face with age old art and tradition, but also extreme poverty alongside wealth and privilege; whole families living in a working sampan, "3 planks", and others crowded into mud huts with only boards to sleep on and a brazier for cooking. He lived with a Chinese family in a small village where a dung heap in the square received all the faeces, dead dogs etc. When he asked about the health risk of this offensive heap he was told

"You Westerners do not understand, we have lived here for 3000 years, and if we did not save everything we would starve"

John travelled with a missionary, up rivers by boat and visited areas where no one had ever seen a "foreign devil" and saw how people had lived for generation after generation in very primitive style [but all they knew existed]

When his contract ended John set off to visit America. This required getting to Tokyo to catch a boat to San Francisco. Imagine his surprise to find an apparently unescorted and very attractive 16 year old young lady on board! Her father [Alonzo Woodworth} was an American missionary going home on furlough and he spent his time talking to other men on board, while her mother, Ida, suffered from seasickness and spent most of the time in her cabin. By the time they reached San Francisco, John popped the question, was accepted, and obtained the parent's approval. Then the Woodworths went home to Merom, Indiana

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while John made for Chicago where building was booming to house a huge influx of migrants coming in at the rate of 5000 per week.

[but some of it of appalling standard, with no provision of water or toilets except out in the yard!] He spent a year there learning for the first time of reinforced concrete and other new technology [but he was the only one in the office with a grounding in the Greek classic orders] Having only visited his future wife, Ruth, a few times, John then headed to England and Europe [highly valuable experience for a young architect to see the historic buildings, but even there he saw unbelievable crowding, squalor and lack of services]

On his return home John set up a practice with Walter Drummond [Who helped start "Rotary" in Australia]. By 1914 John wrote to Ruth, [now back in Japan] to ask if she would come to Melbourne to marry him as he could now support her. She came alone on a slow freighter which didn't arrive until the day after the wedding date, so it was postponed till the next Saturday [the only day, other than Sunday, that people were not at work] They rented a house for 10 shillings per week until their new house in Barloa Rd. Mont Albert was built. When they moved in, it was the first time either of them had lived in a house with electric light and mains water in the kitchen and bathroom [but the laundry and toilet were still in an outhouse at the back]

About this time, John became assistant to Ankatell Henderson, an engineer, who lectured on Architecture at the Engineering school at Melbourne University. A groundswell of students, supported by the Institute, wanted an Architecture faculty. Bill Blackett was appointed to replace Henderson, but went off to the war soon after. So did Alec Eggleston and Rodney Alsop in turn, so not much happened until after the war.

When John and Ruth's second daughter was born, Ruth said "now I have a reason for living if anything happens to you, so you can join up if you feel the need". This he did and because of his building experience, he was given the rank of Sgt. in the Engineers and sent off to France where he served for 2 years [Together with three brothers and one sister—all but one came back]

World War One was a frightful experience for the troops in the field as they rarely had shelter and often John wished for "a roof over my head". This became a standing joke among his mates and eventually the title of his memoirs, [a book which covers the birth of the Architecture school, Building Regulations and Town Planning in Victoria—well worth reading also as a history book]

While waiting to be shipped home, John was billeted in a French farm village and again experienced the obnoxious dung heap [the same explanation was given— which is why he always buried our kitchen scraps at Mont Albert ]. On the ship coming home John gave lectures on building construction as part of a program to entertain the men —many of his listeners later turned up at his office as clients!

As soon as he arrived back, John was appointed as head of the Architecture School, as Bill Blackett had resigned. [in old Army huts in one corner of the University grounds], so, when an "Architecture Faculty" was established, he became the first Dean of the Faculty, a position he held for 20 years.

Soon after this, the local Progress Association asked him to stand for the Shire of Nunawading Council, to represent the young families, as the orchardist Councillors were more concerned with the rural needs. So, in 1924 he became a Councillor and was confronted with the maze of problems involved in running a Municipality. At an early meeting the construction of a road was approved, but when Cr. Gawler later asked to see the specifications, the Engineer said "There aren't any specifications, all the tenderers know how to build a road!" At this point, John asked to see the house building rules. After a search the Engineer produced one foolscap sheet but explained "that no one ever asked to look at them". So John set to work and produced a new building code. This was duly passed by Council without the other Councillors bothering to read it!

In those days, the role of Councils was very limited by our standards, but soon expanded to include baby health centres, recreational facilities such as swimming

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pools, street lighting, footpaths etc. The provision of piped gas was just becoming available, Box Hill separated from Nunawading and acquired the retailing right for electric supply. I understand that this enterprise funded the building of the Box Hill Town Hall [which John Designed] and it was a bone of contention with Nunawading council for many years after. John also designed the new City of Box Hill Seal [see letter on display]. It is also interesting to note that another argument for building the town hall was that it would supply business for the brick works [badly needed to recover from the depression] John became the Council's representative on the Municipal Association of Victoria and was it's President at the time the "Uniform Building Regulations of Victoria finally got through the long winded process of formation, exhibition, review, and approval [at first it did not apply in the country as the rural Councillors thought it was an imposition thought up by the "city slickers"] So John was extremely busy in the 1920s and now had 5 children to support [and his partner, Walter Drummond died so John was supporting his widow] But when the 1930 depression occurred, work dried up for the building industry. It also hit many workers living in outer suburbs who could no longer afford house payments and train fares, so they tried to sell their homes on a falling market [just like 1888] and, again, many lost everything! John saw all the "for sale" signs and believed that there was a need for cheap rental properties closer to the City [where most people worked]. So he obtained an option on a piece of land in Barkers Rd. Kew, designed a group of flats and approached the ESA Bank for finance, together with a builder named Todd [also out of work]. The Bank agreed that the project had merit and asked the two of them how much capital they would contribute. When the answer was "none" the bank stated that they never financed building 100%, John said "the alternative is two more failed clients with overdrafts" So the Bank agreed, the job went ahead, all the flats were let and the project yielded 11% which no doubt paid for my education!

During the 30s John not only ran a very busy practice but continued as a Councillor, Municipal Association representative, Vestryman and superintendent of the Sunday School at the Anglican church [which he designed], also one of the practicing Architects lecturing at the Architecture School. He even became a company director. Together with other Architects they started "Ozapaper" [a plan printing service] and the "Victor Plaster Company" to obtain plaster from South Australia [as they were being "ripped off" by Sydney suppliers]. The Sydney firm tried to scuttle the enterprise by flooding the market with plaster below production cost but the Victor Co. bought all that turned up until their rival came "cap in hand" to try to arrange a merger, which they refused!

World War Two caused another stop to private building but John was soon recruited by the Federal Government to work in WOI [War Organisation of Industry] which coordinated building work, Australia wide, to direct resources to the most urgent projects [John was the formal issuer of permits in Victoria].

Then, as the tide of war turned, the Government, in 1943, created a new ministry of "Post War Reconstruction" with Ben Chifflery in charge. Chifflery summoned John and four others to Sydney to form a Commonwealth Housing Commission. Leo O'Connor [senior public servant] was chairman, John was deputy, then came Charles Howard an Architect with the Commonwealth Works Dept., Mary Ryan [an ex hospital matron] and Albert Thompson [a politician]. Chifflery thanked them for coming then dug a small slip of paper from a vest pocket and said "ah yes, here it is- Inquire about the present position of housing in Australia and make recommendations for the future" He then asked them to work hard as it was urgent and left them to it! They split into two teams and set about visiting every large town in Australia, to inspect and take evidence from anyone who offered in response to advertised meetings. They worked non-stop for over a year to complete the inspections and write their report. At one point three of them arrived in Cairns in the middle of the night after a 3 day rail journey, with blackout in force and unsure of their hotel's location. As they were wondering what to do next, they were accosted by a policeman who

thought they might be spies, but when they satisfied him with their identities and told of the hotel problem, he escorted them to the hotel only to find it locked up and with no response to the door bell. So the policeman suggested they break in "the top back door is never locked". They found the Hotel register but one of their rooms already had a snoring occupant. So they tiptoed around until they found empty rooms! [the proprietor laughed it off, saying that the bell hadn't worked for years and they all found somewhere to sleep!]

In the 16 months taken until their final report, some major surprises were uncovered; like the BHP works at Port Kembla which was carefully planned down to the last nut and bolt but assumed that private enterprise would house the workers. They, in fact, were crammed into sub standard houses and shops at roughly one family to a room with inadequate shared cooking and toilet facilities. A similar situation occurred at the Newcastle steelworks and, in general, Australia had a severe long term shortage of houses going back to pre world war one, and numerous incidences of "shanty towns" Their report suggested that every family had a need and also a right to an adequate house with kitchen, bathroom and laundry with running water [and not to be used for sleeping]; cooking facilities in the kitchen, a means of heating water for the bathroom and laundry; all rooms to have windows of adequate size and ventilation, bedrooms of minimum sizes and separation of the sexes for children over the age of 8 years [and so on]. But the report also urged sewerage to be provided to all communities of 1000 persons or more, provision of recreational space, introduction of town planning and preservation of coastlines and river frontages! Many, [but not all] of the recommendations have become normal expectations giving today's residents a reliable lifestyle. This report was the "spark plug" for the Commonwealth agreement with the States, to loan them money for mten years, at 3% interest, and to pay 60% of financial losses incurred in providing "low income" housing. The Victorian Housing Commission [of which John was a a member until 1952] built 22,000 houses in the ten years!

Town planning ideals always seem to be opposed by financial goals. The first Victorian "Metropolitan Town Planning Commission" was set up in 1922 to examine ideals and cost of proper developments of ports, public transport, provision of extra housing, reservation of parkland and so on. Surveyor Fred Cook and secretary A.K.Kemsley were the main contributors to the far reaching report but the Government did nothing with it until the "Town and Country Planning Act" of 1944, and, with a change of Government, did not actually appoint a Board until 1946. John was made chairman, supported by Fred Cook and Kemsley for a 5 year term. During this time the whole of Victoria was subdivided into regions, [the only State to achieve this], a traffic census was made for the Metropolitan area to locate an extra bridge over the Yarra, the Latrobe Valley region completely re planned to avoid building over coal fields and a great deal more "cutting edge" work to confront the many shortcomings of our State..

At the end of his five year contract, John was asked by the Premier, to serve for a further five years, but being past retiring age, he declined. He also declined a "New Year's Honour" as he had no such aspirations, but recommended that his most efficient and dedicated secretary be given suitable recognition -[this was done] Meanwhile "back at the ranch" John had converted one end of his Mont Albert property into a rented 2 story house, started to drive a car [when his partner died], built a new two story brick house on one corner of the remaining property and turned the old house into a villa pair.

Our family used to go on Sunday afternoon walks, often passing houses of men who had started businesses and were known to my father. He would describe their successes and always finish by saying "he's a good chap". So I learnt that "a good chap" was probably a God fearing, hard working ex-serviceman who did the right thing by his wife and family. By this standard my father was a "very good chap".

In those days much business was conducted by word of mouth and a handshake [much less work for lawyers and more transparent contracts] Eventually he sold the new house, [after his children moved out], and lived in one of the villa pair. [recently, another new house has appeared on what was originally the tennis court, making 5 houses on the old house site. John built another house in Springvale road and spent his retirement developing flats in Box Hill and then acting as handyman to change tap washers or whatever his tenants needed. He also graduated to power tools and built some 100 coffee tables with timber from old wardrobes, bought from Joel's Auctions. He served as a Councillor for 25 years, was President of the Victorian Institute of Architects, and of the Municipal Association of Victoria, and was still lecturing at the Architecture school at least until 1950. I knew about his role as a Councillor and his University work [as I was one of his students], but he never said much about all his other roles in the community [He just went to work, like everyone else]

What an extraordinary and productive life for a man brought up without much education to become a real pioneer in the field of human housing! I don't think it's even a slight exaggeration to say that John Gawler changed the way we all live today PS he built his first brick veneer house for a client in Camberwell, opposed by council, in 1915, Just another example of his foresight? He was also one of the first to use "clinker bricks" when seeking cheap material for a church hall and was offered the "discards" free. Clinkers became popular and cost more than normal bricks!