

ROUGH NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF LEGACY ACCOMMODATION IN  
MELBOURNE (1923-1968).

In the early years of Melbourne Legacy there was no established office, and business was conducted from the offices of some of the members who were in a position to provide space and time.

Amongst these could be numbered Stan Savige, Cyril Smith, Frank Selleck, Pip Powell and, later, Vin Ellingworth, the Wooton Brothers, Hugh Brain, Downing and Williams.

When Melbourne Legacy eventually moved into Legacy House in Market Street, the secretarial work was performed mainly in the office of Miss Wheeler, who conducted a business as a Public Typiste and Secretary.

Miss Wheeler became very dedicated to Legacy and worked long hours - often under pressure for very little recompense.

When Jack Barnes was appointed Secretary on a fulltime basis he built up a small staff which worked under difficulties, and some of the growing work load still had to be farmed out to the offices of individual Legatees.

During the Second War, an American firm manufactured in Australia under licence, a patented spark plug for aero engines, and the Australian agents were the firm of Brown and Dureau.

At the end of the war credit restrictions were such that it was difficult to transfer the accumulated royalties back to America, and on the death of David Dureau the Directors of this wealthy company in America decided to donate £                    to any organisation in Australia which was carrying out a worthwhile service job amongst dependants of ex-servicemen.

Legacy landed this Bonanza and decided to create a Building Fund to establish a permanent home for Melbourne Legacy. After much scouting around the city, a building in Swanston Street was located and it had some features which seemed very suitable for the purpose required.

It was the old Hibernian Hall, where Madame Melba first sang publicly in Melbourne.

A large building with an imposing architectural faience front in a splendid situation on the main arterial approach to the city and with an adjoining area of State-owned vacant land with 33' frontage to Swanston Street, it seemed to be the answer to our prayers.

A Title search revealed that ownership rested with the Hocking Bros., who were well known to be very keen and exceedingly difficult property investors. A strong Property Committee was formed which included Syd Birrell and Jim Gillespie and when the Hocking Bros. were approached, several momentous sessions ensued, with much argument, and verbal thrusting and parrying, fortified by the consumption of several bottles of Scotch.

Eventually the Hocking Bros. agreed to transfer the Title to the Hibernian Hall provided that Legacy could find a suitable alternative premises to offer in exchange, and were adamant that they were not interested

in placing a cash price on the subject property. The property scouts went on prowl again, and at last came up with a prospective property in Lonsdale Street right opposite Wesley Church.

Hocking Bros. became most interested in this alternative -- mainly because it had more future potential than the subject property, and agreed to an exchange.

Much negotiation then became necessary to clear away legal difficulties, and to arrange purchases and transfers within the powers of the Trust.

However, this problem was eventually overcome with the assistance of some more Scotch lubrication, and Melbourne Legacy acquired and became registered proprietors in fee simple of the old building in Swanston Street, known as Hibernian Hall.

As in most property deals, however, there was a serious "fly in the ointment", because the transfer was subject to existing tenancies, and as all such tenancies were under Post War Landlord and Tenant Act controls, securing vacant possession became an almost insoluble problem.

In desperation, tenants were sued, and taken to Court, but all to no avail, and it was not even possible to forecast a future date when the Club might be able to assume vacant possession.

The only consolation in the situation was that rentals were accruing and were swelling the amount set aside in the Property Account.

After several years of stalemate and with strong rumours in the air that the Melbourne City Council was negotiating a property development deal over the whole of the Western Market site, the Board of Management were not unnaturally somewhat uneasy as to a future home for Legacy headquarters.

About this time it was decided to transfer the old established Tattersalls from Hobart to Melbourne and the architect who was retained to find a location for the Lottery Headquarters here, made a fantastic offer for the purchase of the Swanston Street property, which was nearly double the figure paid a few years before by Melbourne Legacy.

After considering the difficulty of clearing the tenants, and weighing the advantages of swelling the Property Account total considerably, thus making it possible to seek another property in Melbourne, the cash offer was accepted.

A search for new premises suitable for the Club's purpose did not produce immediate results, and the clouds of doubt as to continuance of occupation of space in the Western Market were looming dark, and ominous.

The Commonwealth had occupied a warehouse-type building in Swanston St. during the war years as a Defence store, and when this occupancy ceased, pressure was exerted by the Commonwealth Department of Health to acquire the building as a permanent headquarters for the Department in Melbourne. The acquisition by agreement was duly effected, but when the estimates for alterations required were released by the Department of Works, the amount

involved frightened both the Treasury and the Minister for Works, and in the interim period the building was used to house personnel engaged on the Commonwealth Census and all returns from Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia were collated there.

When this task was completed, the Health Department had not made any progress in the provision of funds for the alteration programme, and faced with having the building empty, the Minister for the Interior decided to quit the building and directed that it be offered for sale.

The Chief Property Officer, after having received this instruction happened to be seated at Legacy lunch one Tuesday between Rob Allison, a Vice-President at the time, and Bill Scott, the Realty expert.

During lunch the Vice-President queried why, with so many property experts about, Legacy could not seem to get a suitable property in its sights for purchase as Legacy House headquarters.

The Commonwealth Property Officer countered by suggesting that the live Estate Agent should be in a better position to seek a property, but if they really were serious about it he was prepared to show them a prospective property which was on the market for sale. This offer was eagerly accepted and straight after lunch the trio piled into Bill Scott's Rolls Royce and sailed down Collins Street in great style.

When confronted with Red Cross House, they were certainly impressed both with its floor area, and its location - right opposite a tram stop on the main arterial route through the city.

It was then referred to the B.O.M. and a sub-committee comprising the President, a solicitor, an architect and engineer, a master builder, and a company director, was appointed to investigate further and report back to the Board. This sub-committee completed its assignment very faithfully and prepared plans and estimates for reconstruction and renovation to comply with various Health Department regulations and City Council Building By-laws, together with lists of furniture which would be necessary, and estimated costs for the complete removal from the run-down and dilapidated Western Market rooms, to a new set-up designed to cater for the Club's growing activities.

It was then decided to offer the whole of the sum of money in the Building Fund which had grown considerably through the years with rentals and profit on sale of buildings, but which was nevertheless below the departmental value of the subject property.

The Minister took this proposition to Cabinet, and verbal support to the acceptance of the offer was indicated, but before the contract could be drawn there was a re-shuffle of portfolios and the Minister, who was a Victorian, was dropped from Cabinet.

The new Minister, from another State, was a bit nervous about recommending acceptance of an offer which was against the precedent that surplus property should be offered at auction in the open market. However, there were those who knew him, and who could pass on "the good word"

and convince him that Legacy at least merited sympathetic consideration because the work of Legacy had saved the Commonwealth from much expense over the years, and had never received a subsidy of any kind from any of the Government funds.

At long last, and with a sigh of relief, the negotiations were completed and the transfer of ownership was effected.

It then became necessary to raise funds for the reconstruction and furnishing of the building.

It was decided that - for the first time in the history of Melbourne Legacy - a public appeal should be launched to provide the necessary funds. The target sum set for this appeal was £80,000, and it is to the great credit of the fair name of Legacy, that the amount was over-subscribed in a surprisingly short period of a few weeks.

A Legatee architect, and a Legatee master builder, then got to work with the job of "gutting" the building, and protecting the floors and steel frame with fire protective measures to satisfy the Department of Health and the City Council By-laws.

It involved new floors throughout the ceilings sprayed with vermiculate - for both fire delay action and acoustic effect, and the casing of bare steel columns and beams in the old warehouse structure.

Complete overhaul of the fire sprinkler system was also necessary and provision of up-to-date toilet facilities involved alteration of sewerage and water supply.

The floors were also subdivided to suit the peculiar Club requirements.

Full marks must be allotted to those who gave their time and energies to achieving a remarkable result; in fact, Legacy House Melbourne compares more than favourably with any other capital city Legacy headquarters in Australia.

The ground floor is leased to suitable tenants and produces a rental which helps considerably towards the maintenance of the property without using funds donated for the purpose of assisting those whom we are privileged to serve.

And let us not forget that the Club owns a valuable freehold asset - probably the only freehold with a frontage of 80 feet to Swanston Street, and a site which must grow in value with the growth of the city, especially if and when the city underground railway is constructed to serve the northern part of the Golden Mile.

So - all in all - we can claim that fortune smiled on Legacy when the establishment of a permanent city headquarters was finally achieved.

F.J.D.

FRANK DOOLAN

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