

# Elizabeth Street

## Historical Character Study



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### Introduction

The following historical character study of Elizabeth Street was developed to bring to life aspects of the street's identity that have faded from collective memory. The study area is the original extent of Elizabeth Street within the Hoddle grid running from Flinders Street to Lonsdale Street. The study draws on key themes that characterised discussion of Elizabeth Street during its development and evolution throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is not a contemporary character study, but rather one that helps us understand the depth of the human experience of the place, beyond the common perception today. Present day Elizabeth Street is a constant hive of activity with consumers, commuters, workers and tourists. It is a key commercial artery of the city with a rich identity, and always has been. This study will help show where the street came from.

### On The Banks of the Birrarung

Before what was to become the market town of Melbourne, in the Port Phillip district of the British colony of New South Wales, was the banks of the Birrarung, the ancient Aboriginal country of the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clans of the Kulin people. There were no roads, markets or churches perceptible to the first Europeans, but intimately and casually present in the minds of the Aboriginal people were the routes, meeting places, hunting grounds and sacred sites known and named from a time before memory. In their haste in re-naming places, the Europeans lost the Birrarung river in translation, and a great river of the Kulin people became known as the Yarra.

"We have dispossessed the natives of their lands but we have taken possession of neither cities, nor vineyards, nor olive yards." (Anon, 1850)

The imposition of urban space on this landscape, already rich with function and meaning, was rapid and changed forever the relationship between Aboriginal people and their country. That said, in the early days of settlement, Melbourne was very much a shared space, as the Aboriginal population of the hinterland continued to practice their traditional lifeways and outnumbered the townspeople.

"Town-centred cross-cultural contact was not an unusual experience in early Australia – Aborigines resided in most British outposts, motivated initially by curiosity, rations and trade, and later as refugees dispossessed from their homelands... the intensity of cross-cultural life at the Yarra in the first few months of settlement is almost without parallel. Throughout Melbourne's first year it was less a case of Aborigines 'coming in' to the British camp than of a small group of Britons 'coming in' to Kulin country." (Boyce, 2013)

### From Bearhup to Melbourne

In 1835 two sons of British convicts transported to Australia, John Batman and John Pascoe Fawkner, initiated a process that would result in the creation of the city of Melbourne. In May of that year, John Batman as the expedition leader for the Tasmanian based Port Phillip Association, signed the infamous treaty with the Kulin people, allowing British settlement on 600,000 acres of their land around Port Phillip Bay in return for an annual tribute. Three months later in August 1835, Launceston publican John Pascoe Fawkner financed his own expedition to Port Phillip Bay and instructed his men to establish the first permanent non-Aboriginal settlement on the banks of the Yarra River. Others soon followed from Tasmania, however their arrival was neither compliant with Aboriginal law nor with



British law. The illegal township of Tasmanian squatters was known to them as Bearhup, a corruption of Birrarung, to outsiders it was simply known as the Settlement.

As soon as news of the settlement reached colonial authorities in Sydney, Governor Richard Bourke nullified Batman's treaty. Despite Governor Bourke's initial refusal to authorise the settlement, within a year 177 people and 26,000 sheep had crossed Bass Strait and the governor had little option but to endorse the move. The Tasmanian village on the Yarra was officially named the town of Melbourne by Governor Bourke, after the then British prime minister. The seeds of a new colony and its new capital were sown.

### **The Hoddle Grid**

The street plan which became known as the Hoddle Grid was initially drawn up by the surveyor, architect and artist Robert Russell while delayed at Melbourne in 1836.

"While waiting, it occurred to me that we might as well fill in time by making a survey of the future settlement ... Out of mischief I made a survey of the site of Melbourne, without official instructions." (Maxwell, 2003)

The plan was not original and followed an officially developed model of how a colonial town should be laid out. As Russell admitted, it was based on –

"... a plan in the Sydney office generally approved as suitable for laying out a new township, and I had a copy of it... [it was] scarcely a design, simply 24 ten acre squares'." (Maxwell, 2003)

Continuing Russell's unofficial work, Governor Bourke and surveyor Robert Hoddle traced out on horseback the streets of the new township of Melbourne in March 1837 to a design that would bear the second surveyor's name. Bourke named the streets, honouring his dead wife Elizabeth Jane Bourke with Elizabeth Street, which was to become the spine of the city in the nineteenth century and the central east west dividing axis.

Governor Bourke wrote in his journal on the 4<sup>th</sup> March 1837;

"In the afternoon rode over the ground adjacent to the huts with surveyor Hoddle and traced the parcel outline of a township upon a beautiful and convenient site. It does not however promise to afford water, which must be procured / at first at least / certainly from the river. A good dam will require to be constructed here to keep up the fresh water and effect is continued separation from the salt. There appears to be good brick earth here and stone is to be found tho' not of a good quality for building. Timber is to be had but at a distance of about 8 miles. Limestone is said to be found near Point Nepean at the entrance of Port Phillip. It is [...] probable that both lime and timber will for some time be imported from Van Diemen's Land. Tho this site is deficient in many of the important qualities for the easy establishing of a town, it possesses the advantages of being at the head of the navigation of a [...] river"

## Street versus Nature

The streets of Melbourne were initially marked with wooden pegs and defined from the surrounding land by the clearing of brush and scrub. This was a substantial task that involved the clearance of many trees, stumps, filling up stump holes and the removal of the occasional Bearhup era hut. Governor Bourke directed that convict gangs undertake these tasks, which they continued to do from 1837 to 1841. Despite four years of back-breaking labour, the streets of Melbourne could not hold their own against Mother Nature.

“[Anon in 1841] What between stumps and gullies, rivulets, lakes and bogs, it is rather a Herculean task to wade the streets of Melbourne in wet weather.” (Brown-May, 1998)

After the formation of Melbourne City Council in 1841, one of the most pressing tasks was improving Elizabeth Street, which in its short existence had become the most troublesome street in Melbourne.



Figure 1: Elizabeth Street, looking south 1867.

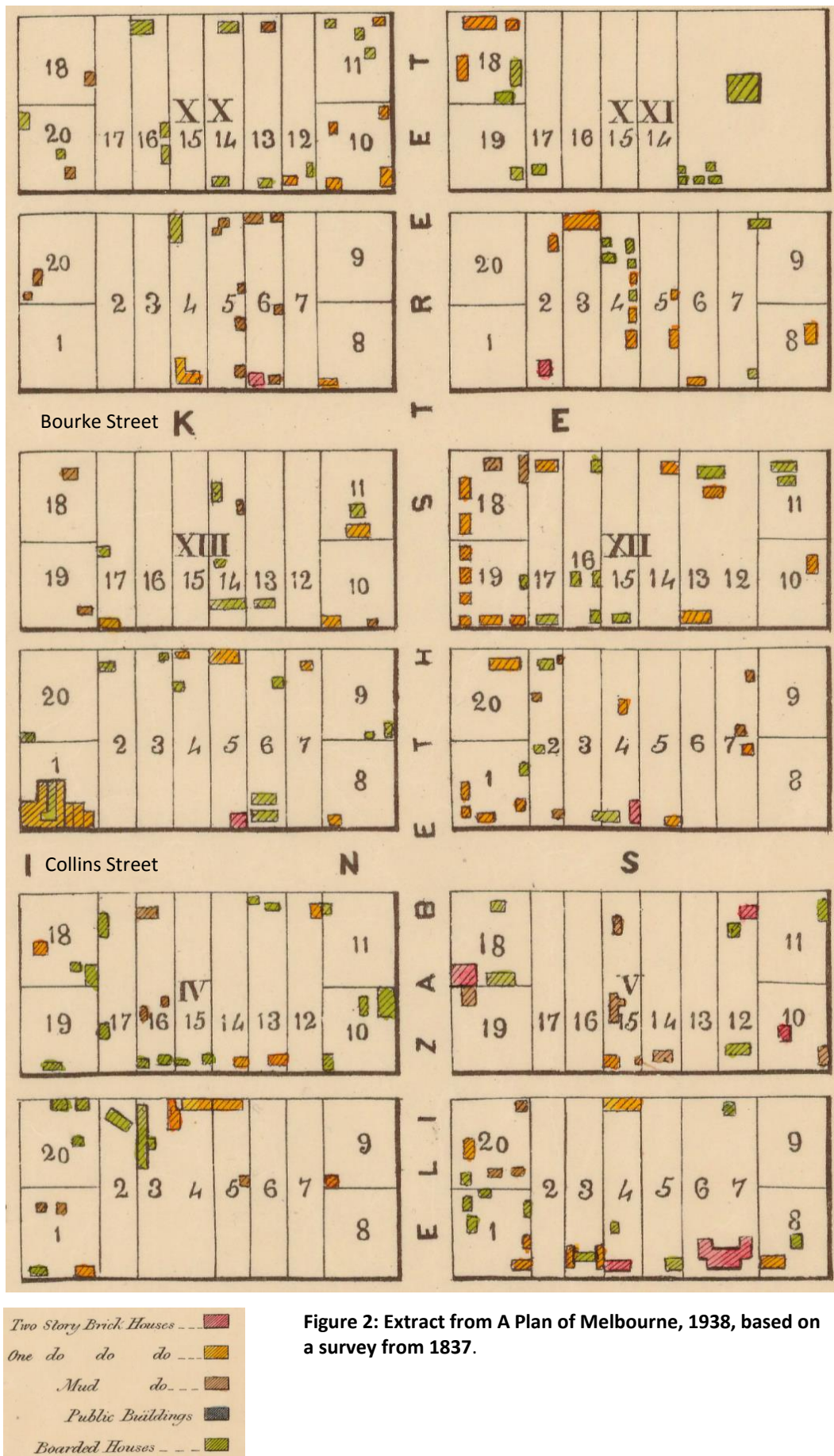


Figure 2: Extract from A Plan of Melbourne, 1938, based on a survey from 1837.



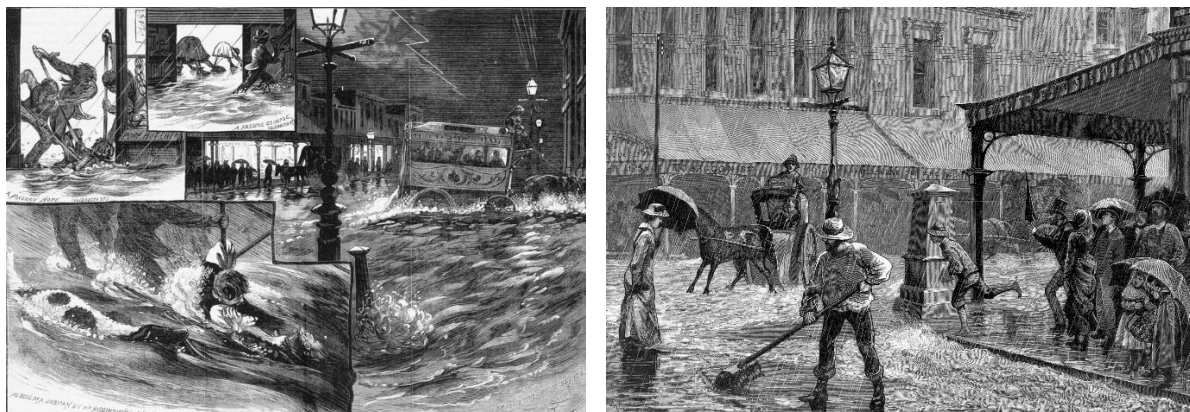
“[William Westgarth in 1888] The bane and bottomless deep for the corporation's narrow budget was Elizabeth-street, where a little "casual" called "The Williams," of a mile's length, from the hardly perceptible hollows of the present Royal Park, played sad havoc at times with the unmade street. It had scooped out a course throughout, almost warranting the title of a gully, and at Townend's corner [southwest corner of Collins and Elizabeth Streets] we needed a good long plank by way of a bridge. At the upper end of the street was a nest of deep channels which damaged daily for years the springs and vehicles of the citizens.” (Westgarth, 1888)

As well as forming the spine of the city, Elizabeth Street also followed the approximate alignment of a drainage line running into the Yarra, an inconvenient piece of topography that was to characterise the street throughout the nineteenth century.

“[Anon in 1843] It was no uncommon thing to see a loaded dray bogged in the principal street, the wheels being sunk into holes, two or three feet deep, from which the strength of ten or twelve bullocks is required to extricate it.” (Brown-May, 1998)

Whether altogether true or not, newspaper man Thomas Strode recalled one of the enduring urban legends of Elizabeth Street in 1868 –

“[Thomas Strode in 1868] At almost every hour of the day may be viewed the interesting spectacle of drays being bogged in the muddy depths of Collins Street... we remember on [one] occasion a dray of bullocks were so hopelessly imbedded in a hole in Elizabeth Street, that the animals were allowed to stifle in the mud, and its being nobody's duty to remove the nuisance, their remains with that of the dray, lie buried in that extemporary graveyard to the present day.” (Annear, 2014)



**Figure 3 and 4: Elizabeth Street floods in 1881 (left) and 1882 (right)**

Dramatic flood stories were synonymous with Elizabeth Street throughout the Victorian period and the early twentieth century. Events which no longer seem credible were common place –

“[Hume Nisbet in 1891] One dry morning, while I was waiting my turn for letters at the Post Office on a mail day, I was startled by seeing a great tidal wave rolling down Elizabeth Street ... I got up the ornamental base of one of the pillars and clung there, with the water dashing over my waist, while some of the less fortunate ones were swept away.” (Brown-May, 1998)

In heavy rain the natural topography defied the urban straitjacket, Elizabeth Street's ever present drainage line came to the fore making it a highway of the city's rubbish –

“[Edwin Carton Booth in 1868] Pieces of timber, wisps of straw, waste paper, and corks, as they are borne past and beyond carpenters' shops, stable yards, printing offices or hotels, sufficiently indicate

the character of the neighbourhoods from which they have been carried; corks come down into the main stream from every side. From all the rights of way they pour in crowds. They rush out of the lower slums of Little Burke Street, and from both ends of every street in town, until they collect in a dense mass in the wide space between Collins Street and Flinders Lane, where they form a closely packed army of bobbing Bedouins, testifying to the absorbent powers of the population, when bottled beer is in question.” (Brown-May, 1998)

Gradually the road surface was improved first with Macadam – compacted basalt chips – and then Tarmacadam – compacted basalt chips bound with tar. It would take until 1870 before Melbourne’s first asphalt footpath was laid in Elizabeth Street, and it would take the installation of underground drains in the 1880’s before street flooding was at least partly managed.

### Iconic Buildings and Corners

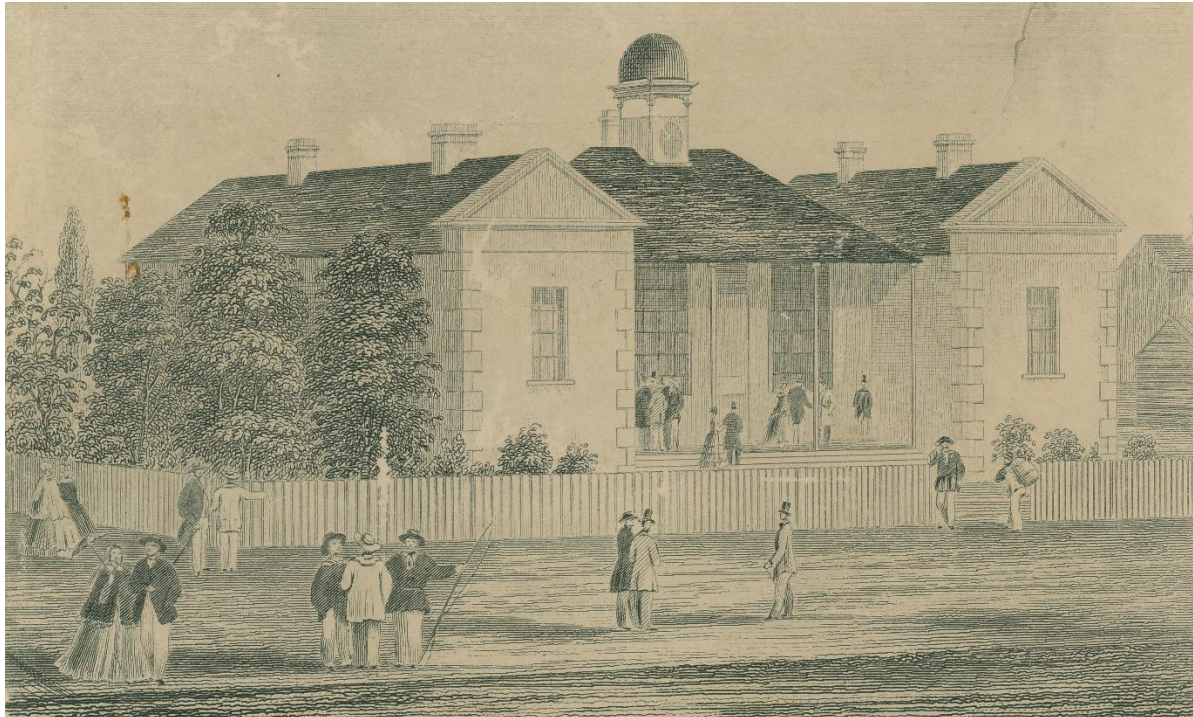
Throughout its history Elizabeth Street hosted a number of buildings and street-corners which became iconic Melbourne destinations. One of Melbourne’s earliest extant buildings and certainly Elizabeth Street’s earliest surviving building is St Francis Catholic Church on the corner of Elizabeth and Lonsdale Streets. Building of the church commenced in 1841 and since its construction it was known as the Mother Catholic Church of Victoria. It was designed by architect Samuel Jackson, a member of Fawkner’s first 1835 expeditionary party.



Figure 5: St Frances Church, 1845



The site of the city's first permanent post office and present General Post Office is located on the corner of Elizabeth and Bourke Streets, in the middle of the Hoddle Grid. First built in 1841 and substantially expanded in 1867, the GPO became the centre point of the city, the place from which all distances to Melbourne were officially measured.



**Figure 6: The Post Office, 1841**

“On August 12 1841, David Keish, post-master, transferred his office from Collins street west in a small brick building built for the purpose on the site of the present post-office in Elizabeth street. The postage for a letter to Sydney was one shilling threepence and it took three weeks to deliver the letter. Melbourne’s first letter-carrier appeared in a scarlet coat and gold-laced hat. A clock was placed on top of the post-office by the settlers to mark the opening of the new post-office and its care was entrusted to Joseph Greening, a watchmaker. According to [Edmund Finn] the clock was a great trial for its keeper. It kept bad hours, sometimes jumping forward half an hour and then lagging a quarter. “To make confusion worse ... the post-office authorities used to humour the eccentricities of the clock by regulating the mail hours according to its crotchets. The window was opened and closed and the mails delivered or dispatched according to the clock” (Anon, Elizabeth Street has a Colourful Part in the Eventful Story of Melbourne, 1937)

The separation of Victoria as an independent colony from New South Wales and the discovery of gold in the colony both happened in 1851 and from that period onward Melbourne experienced dramatic growth. The gold rush of the following decade saw the population of Victoria explode from just under 100,000 to almost 540,000. The main exit and entry point of the city to the gold fields of the Ballarat and Bendigo districts.

“Elizabeth Street saw the adventurers go and saw them return – broken or prosperous. All ways to the diggings led from Elizabeth Street. The first coach for the diggings left Passmore’s Hotel, at the corner of Elizabeth and Lonsdale streets, laden with passengers on October 6 1851. This hotel was a landmark from the early settlement days. It was a refuge for ‘man and beast’ after rough overland journeys.” (Anon, Elizabeth Street has a Colourful Part in the Eventful Story of Melbourne, 1937)



**Figure 7: Melbourne General Post Office under construction, 1865**

During and after the gold rush there were many iconic buildings which drew people to Elizabeth Street in great numbers, in addition to the numerous small shops and hotels. Elizabeth Street was thought of as the equivalent of London's Oxford Street, given the number and variety of commercial and recreational pursuits available to the public. Perhaps one of the biggest draws was the centre of the city itself, the intersection of Elizabeth and Bourke Streets, with the GPO on one side and Beehive Corner on the other, home of the Beehive Clothing Company and the later London Stores. The other iconic intersection was with Collins Street, which housed Alston's Corner – the site of an early tobacconist shop and reputedly Melbourne's first brick building, and; Equitable Corner – home of the Equitable Life Assurance Company, constructed by Nellie Melba's father David Mitchell.

Despite the changing face of the streetscape throughout the twentieth century, many Victorian buildings have survived and parts of others repurposed and rehomed. The earliest buildings are no longer standing but they have not completely disappeared and their archaeological stories have yet to be told.

As the twentieth century progressed the tram and motorcar displaced the horse, buggy, cart and pedestrian as users of the street itself. By the 1950's the footpaths of Elizabeth Street had almost completely lost the quintessential Victorian street verandahs, allowing a greater volume of pedestrians quicker and easier travel. The modern face of Elizabeth was formed in the following decades and as the street continues to evolve it remains, as it always was, an essential part of the identity, fabric and function of the city



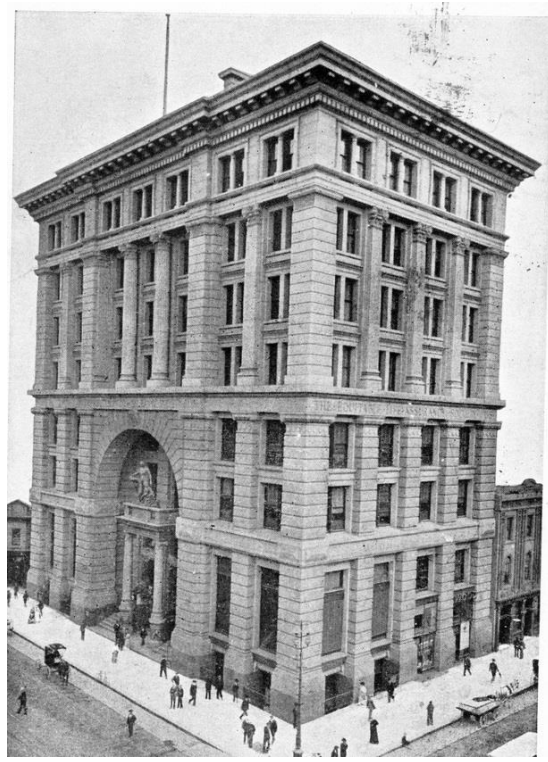


Figure 8: The Beehive Clothing building on the corner of Bourke and Elizabeth Streets, 1888



Figure 9: BH Alston's Tobacconist was reputedly the first brick building in Melbourne, early 1900s





**Figure 10 (Left): The London Stores building on the south east corner of Bourke and Elizabeth Streets, 1973**

**Figure 11 (Right): The Equitable building on the north west corner Collins and Elizabeth Street, 1906**

### Bookending the Block

As a result of people being naturally drawn to the centre of the city, the absence of a central square within the Hoddle Grid was often lamented throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A recurring preferred location for such an amenity was the block bounded by Collins, Swanston, Bourke and Elizabeth streets. Irrespective of the lack of a physical central square, Melbourne's population independently created a social equivalent known as the Block, a ritual promenade down Collins Street from Swanston to Elizabeth Streets. Doing the Block was a core part of Melbourne culture throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. At the end of World War 1, an observer described the ritual –

"Rich or poor, gentle or simple, there they were, promenading, shopping, sightseeing or picnicking ... In Collins, Bourke, Swanston and Elizabeth Streets, on a fine afternoon may be seen ... hosts of ladies flitting about in the most airy and fascinating style – fluttering like so many butterflies in the sunshine – some very pretty, but all interesting to look at ...

From Swanston Street down to Elizabeth Street, and then back again to Swanston street, they drift in an ever-increasing tide. A few of them appear to be there with a purpose ... but the vast majority are there simply because it is "the Block," and "to do the Block" afternoon in and afternoon out is part of the daily ritual of their lives.

It used to be the fashion to sneer at the Young Man on the Block. He was generally an anaemic little fellow who loafed on the edge of the pavement and exercised a pretty taste in purple socks and cheap cigarettes. But there is a new Young Man on the Block today – a young man with set to his shoulders, and a jaunty tilt to his khaki cap [World War 1 returned servicemen]. He has earned the freedom of his city, and he saunters up and down her streets like a schoolboy happy in his holiday. With him walks the Block girl, smartly dressed and smartly shod, with a cheeky little look from under a cheeky little hat, and a dapper pair of black silken ankles twinkling up the street. ... Boys wearing the colours of

every public school in Melbourne stroll up and down in slavish imitation of their elder brothers or join up similar groups of smiling 'flappers'.

The Block has its own character as the Block has its own crowd. The pessimist may condemn it for its aimlessness and its idleness. But to those who are daily drawn to it by the grey magnet of its pavement, it is the centre of all things, it is Melbourne incarnate – in a word it is 'the Block'." (Anon, Doing the Block, 1919)



Figure 12: Doing the Block, Collins Street, 1880

### Experiencing the Street

The throngs of people frequenting Elizabeth Street and surrounds had to combat a distinctive background odour produced by the other key user group of the street - the transport animals who hauled people and goods throughout the nineteenth century. The manure from horses and bullocks produced a smell as familiar to Victorian era Melbournians as the exhaust fumes of today are to us. Teams of orderly boys were employed to collect the manure which was commonly used as landfill or garden fertiliser. The orderly boys performed an essential street maintenance function, although their role was generally regarded as the classic bottom of the ladder job.





**Figure 13: Horses, carts and buggies on Elizabeth Street, early 1900s**

In addition to filtering out the background odour, Victorian Melbournians also had to contend not only with the menace of speeding riders and carriages, but also the very real threat posed by stray dogs.

“Vigilant pedestrians carried a ‘genuine piece of blackthorn’ to ward off savage mastiffs of bloodhounds.” (Brown-May, 1998)

The genuine piece of blackthorn was the Shillelagh, the quintessential Irish fighting stick, finding a new use in Melbourne as defence against the emancipated hunting dogs of the city.

Victorian pedestrians faced potential assault on their ears as well as their nostrils and limbs. The calls of the hawkers and newspaper boys to attract customers were a recurring nuisance to some;

“[Anon in 1901] it has been impossible to pass along Collins, Burke, Swanston Elizabeth, or Flinders Streets [without] being beset by a bevy of bellowing boys, leather-lunged and brazen throated, each one yelling out ‘prize-ticket-o’-th’-gay-larr’ as if his life depended on making a more hideous noise than his rivals...” (Brown-May, 1998)

For the Melburnian in need of respite from the street and sustenance to continue the day, there were any number of restaurants and hotels around Elizabeth Street. There were eateries to cater for all budgets;

“[Marcus Clark in 1869] The hill between Elizabeth and Lonsdale Streets is the place to go for a cheap dinner. See the placards: - ‘Roast Goose today!’ ‘Goose and apple sauce!’ ‘Try our prime rabbits’, and so on. The shops are numerous, the odour issuing there-from savoury.” (Clarke, 1869)



If a sit-down meal was not the preference, there were plenty of alternative refreshments;

“The true and absolute Bohemian detests fixtures of all kinds, and prefers to take his meals standing, or walking, or lying, or in any posture but sitting. For this purpose, the various street stalls sprung into existence. It was found that not only did honest toil going to its work at dawn require a cup of coffee to cheer its honest heart, but that vagabondism and theft, sneaking to their unholy errands, were prepared to pay for a gentle stimulant also. Upon this arose coffee-stalls, pie-stalls and trotter-baskets...” (Clarke, 1869)

Should a visit to the pie-stall be the order of the day, the following experience would have been commonplace;

“The pies are eatable but peppery. Pepper takes off the ‘flavour of the meat’. They are made in batches, and are composed of the ‘pieces’ of meat from the butchers’, baked, and washed over with a seasoning of salt and water and egg. When the pie is baked the pieman pokes his finger through the top crust, and pours in the ‘gravy’, made of salt and water, by means of a can with a long spout. The meat is always mutton or beef. “Mutton’s cheaper than cat!” said a man to me one day with his mouth full, “go ahead, it’s alright!” (Clarke, 1869)

From the venders of coffee and food, Elizabeth Street was also home to many other practitioners of the itinerant economy, who contributed in a major way to the character of the street and the city. Some were living testimony to the vagaries of fortune that many Melburnians experienced during the boom and bust years of the nineteenth century’ –

“There is plenty of ‘character’ in the streets of Melbourne, if one only has the patience to seek it out. ‘Characteristic bits’ are very like the nuggets of the country; plenty of them about, and rich, but they require to be unearthed. A casual picking of the ground or a single walk through our thoroughfares will reveal little or nothing. The searcher must be on his claim at all times of the day and with his eyes well -open. He is sure to get his nugget at last, perhaps more than one. The ‘Cockatoo Hawker’ belongs to the soil. He is to be found at odd times near the corner of Elizabeth-street and Flinders-street. For weeks you may pass this spot and there will be no sign of him, but a thoroughly fine day may bring him out. He is at his post today, so let us note him. In one hand he holds two caged birds, while with the other he thrusts out a stick on which a melancholy cockatoo sits and surveys the passers-by. Our hawker wears spectacles and shaves under the chin, and wears his clothes with an air. Altogether he gives one the impression of a man who has seen better days, and who has taken to cockatoo selling because it is easy, and perhaps because it affords him opportunity of critically surveying the busy world he no longer mixes in.” (Anon, Street Studies, 1887)



Figure 14: Cockatoo Hawker on Elizabeth Street, 1887

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## Figures

Figure	Date	Source	Author / creator
Cover page	1847	Elizabeth St. Melbourne <a href="http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1681015">http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1681015</a>	J S Prout
1	1867	Elizabeth Street Looking South from Bourke Street <a href="http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/69660">http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/69660</a>	Charles Nettleton
2	1839	A Plan of Melbourne Port Phillip from Actual Survey <a href="http://Search.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/Main:Slv_Voyager681160">http://Search.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/Main:Slv_Voyager681160</a>	J. Williamson
3	1881	The Recent Floods <a href="http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/132465">http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/132465</a>	William Higginbotham
4	1882	Elizabeth Street in Flood, December 5. <a href="http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/257565">http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/257565</a>	F. A Sleaf
5	1845	St, Francis Church, Melbourne <a href="http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/108235">http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/108235</a>	Thomas Hamm
6	1841	Post Office <a href="http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/71815">http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/71815</a>	Thomas Hamm
7	1865	Melbourne General Post Office Under Construction <a href="http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/290889">http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/290889</a>	
8	1888	View of Elizabeth Street, looking towards Collins Street <a href="http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1720224">http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1720224</a>	Charles B Walker
9	1900	B.H. Alston Tobacconist - first brick building in Melbourne <a href="http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1792711">http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1792711</a>	
10	1973	London Stores Ltd. Street, Melbourne <a href="http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1710427">http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1710427</a>	Wolfgang Seivers
11	1906	Equitable Building Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria <a href="http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/289347">http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/289347</a>	
12	1880	Doing the Block. Gt. Collins St. / S.T.G <a href="http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1663125">http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER1663125</a>	S. T. Gill
13	1900-1914	Street Scene, Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, Vic <a href="http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/73969">http://Handle.Slv.Vic.Gov.Au/10381/73969</a>	
14	1887	The Cockatoo Hawker <a href="http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/258619">http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/258619</a>	