

# FRIENDS OF WESTGARTHTOWN

## Newsletter

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WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF WESTGARTHTOWN, THE WURUNDJERI WILLUM PEOPLE, AND PAY OUR RESPECTS TO THEIR ELDERS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

### EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to new Friends of Westgarthtown members Angela Belôt, John Belôt, Adrienne Doust, Sue Gravenall and Roslyn Greenhill. Thanks to all members who have renewed for 2022/23 and those who have generously donated towards our activities.

In this edition of *Friends of Westgarthtown Newsletter* Gordon Johnston, Director, Ziebell's Farmhouse Museum and Heritage Garden, reports on events over the last six months. Rebecca Vagg, President of the Descendants' Day Committee, also reports on the recent very successful Descendants' Day held on 5 March 2023.

We also feature four research articles. These cover Westgarthtown from 1835–50; Martha (née Graff) Johnson of Doreen; the Pentridge Volunteer Rifles; and the Thomastown Mechanics' Institute and Free Library.

Although German settlement did not commence at Westgarthtown until 1850 the area had been used for grazing purposes by British settlers since at least 1837. Thomastown and Lalor's Catholic community will be interested to learn that one early settler to hold an occupation licence for Section 25, the area on which Westgarthtown was established, was Alexander McKillop, father of Saint Mary MacKillop.

The article about Martha Johnson profiles a very interesting Westgarthtown descendant, but also highlights problems caused when landowners leave surprise beneficiaries in their wills.

Many Thomastown men, including some from Westgarthtown, served with the Pentridge Volunteer Rifles during the 1860s and 1870s. Some of their sons served in South Africa during the Boer War and other descendants served during both world wars.

During the 1920s British and German descendants worked harmoniously to establish a Mechanics' Institute and Free Library at Thomastown. After it was destroyed by fire in 1930 they got to work again and rebuilt it. This building, now owned by the City of Whittlesea, is located in Spring Street.

Rob Wuchatsch

# Ziebell's Farmhouse Museum and Heritage Garden

## DIRECTOR'S UPDATE BY GORDON JOHNSTON

Hello Everyone,

Firstly, it was great to meet many of you at the recent Descendant's Day. Both the museum volunteers and I learnt more about Westgarthtown and its descendants.

There are several key updates regarding the museum. Our horticulturist Christine Burke decided last year that travelling from the Mornington Peninsula was getting too much, which is fair enough. She will still visit periodically and be on hand to advise. Paul Sampson (Paul Sampson Landscapes) has taken on the role. He has extensive experience and has previously worked in the garden so it will be in good hands going forward. Many thanks to Christine for all her knowledge and work for many years.

I've mentioned our audio-visual project in the past. The equipment and related programming are nearly complete. The monitor in the dining room has been replaced with a touchscreen which gives visitors more content and information about Westgarthtown and the wider City of Whittlesea. Further content is being developed.

A small projector has been introduced to the kitchen which highlights the other original houses that visitors can walk past. This enhances their appreciation of Westgarthtown as will the monitor in the cart house.

We have also unveiled our Wardian case which was kindly made for us by the Lalor Men's Shed. It is a work of art and clearly many hours have gone into its design and construction. This invention by Dr Ward in the 1800s, is in effect a small hothouse that meant plants could be carried on ships and survive the journey. In January 1856, Christian Ziebell returned from a ten-month trip to Germany with seeds, plants, cuttings, and trees. Some plants may have been transported using a Wardian case.

The *Pribislaw* story continues. In January the museum received an email from Matt Kirby in Yorkshire, England asking for any information regarding the ship. He wrote:

During the period 1972–76 I was working for Shetland Seafoods in Lerwick, Shetland. At that time there was an old wooden ship lying next to the factory which intrigued me but at the time there was little or no information available and the internet didn't exist.

He had recently visited the area and was curious as to what happened to the ship. His research (now with the internet) connected him to the museum and the replica we have on display. There has been an exchange of emails, photos, research and two international online meetings arranged by Dirk Weissleder, who has collaborated with Rob Wuchatsch in researching the *Pribislaw*. Via Facebook, Matt has made connections with others who remember the ship in its later days as a storage hulk. We are continuing the discussions, which may feed into an exhibition in the future.

Finally, museum visitation remains strong with people travelling from across Melbourne. Tour groups have also rebounded strongly after COVID-19, but John Fry will write more on this in the next edition.

All the best

Gordon

# Descendants' Day 2023

BY REBECCA VAGG



(Photo by Jessica Adams)

On 5 March 2023 the Friends of Westgarthtown held Descendants' Day at Ziebell's Farmhouse. It was quite warm and the garden looked amazing. It was wonderful to see many familiar and new descendants back together again, the first time since 2020. It was also the first Descendants' Day to coincide with a Sunday opening and it was great to share the grounds and museum with the public. It was great to see everyone who was able to come and the sausage sizzle was very enjoyable. The money raised from the sausage sizzle will fund next year's BBQ lunch.

The Lalor Men's Shed presented our museum with a hand-made Wardian case. This was similar to those cases which brought many plant specimens to Australia from Germany. We were also entertained by Sarah and Jackie, who filled us in with words, pictures, all accompanied by a violin, on the story of the invention of the case by Dr John Ward.

As usual we had prizes for the oldest and youngest attendees – John Borrack again received the prize for the wisest and Lennon Jean Ross was the youngest. We also had a lucky door prize – the winner received a pen made of *Pribislaw* wood.

The next Descendants' Day is planned for 3 March 2024, this being 'the Sunday before the Victorian Labour Day weekend'. Please stay safe and well – hope to see everyone next year.



John Borrack, Lennon Jean Ross and Jessica Adams (Jessica Adams).



The story of the Wardian case by Sarah and Jackie (Rob Wuchatsch).



# Westgarthtown from 1835–50

BY ROB WUCHATSCH

Westgarthtown was established in March 1850 following William Westgarth and John Stanley Carr's purchase of Section 25 in the Parish of Keelbundora from the Government on behalf of newly arrived Germans and Wends.

Most of the land surrounding Westgarthtown had been surveyed and sold by the Government in 1838, but Sections 21, 22 and 25 had been withheld, considered too dry to attract buyers. Surveyor Robert Hoddle did not even include the Edgar's Creek on his maps. It was another ten years before these three sections were surveyed and put up for sale and while Section 22 was sold in 1848, Sections 21 and 25 were not sold until 1850.

These three sections, however, had not been unoccupied. During 1837/38, they had been grazed by Melbourne publican and squatter George Smith, but he left when most of his run was sold by the Government in September 1838. During the 1840s Sections 21, 22 and 25 were let to local farmers under annual occupation licences. The most notable of these farmers was Alexander McKillop, father of Australia's only Saint, Mary MacKillop.

I am grateful to Rod Kearney for his assistance with the research for this article.



Saint Mary MacKillop  
(catholicleader.com.au).

## Pastoral era

In June 1835, John Batman visited Port Phillip from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) and signed his infamous treaty with the Wurundjeri-Willum, a clan of the Woiworing language group and members of the Kulin nation. While Thomastown has been suggested as one of the possible sites for Batman's treaty signing, along with Northcote, Epping, Bundoora and Greensborough, the exact location will never be known despite some local historians convincing themselves it took place in their area of interest.

While the British Government did not recognize Batman's treaty, implementing a policy of *terra nullius*, at least 40,000 years of Indigenous occupation were soon swept aside by an invasion of 'overstraiters' from Tasmania and 'overlanders' from north of the Murray River. These new arrivals established pastoral runs around Melbourne and Geelong.

By 1837 George Smith, owner of the Lamb Inn in Melbourne, had a pastoral run along the Darebin Creek between today's Reservoir and Epping. Smith's run appears to have included all of today's Thomastown and Lalor and in 1838 he was recorded as having 1,200 sheep and 20 cattle.

The Government sold thousands of acres of Crown land along the Merri and Darebin Creeks in sections of 640-1,200 acres on 12 September 1838. This was the first rural land sale in the Port Phillip District. As it was fertile, well watered and close to Melbourne, the area soon became Victoria's pioneer farming district.



Robert Hoddle's Roll Plan 104, Melbourne's Surveyed Land, Northward, showing unsold sections at centre (PROV).

Much of Thomastown and Lalor's land (Sections 23, 24 and 26, along with Section 14 in today's Keon Park), was purchased at the 1838 sale by Sydney merchant Robert Campbell Jr (1804–1859). Sometimes referred to as Robert Campbell the Younger, he bought a total of 3,367 acres in the Parish of Keelbundora and 1,495 acres in the adjoining Parish of Will Will Rook, west of the Merri Creek.

Sections 21, 22 and 25, where central Thomastown is located, were withheld from sale. Robert Hoddle, who had surveyed along the Merri and Darebin Creeks in August and September 1837, reported in May 1838 there were plains and lands 'destitute of water that are not likely to be in demand for purchase for years'. He was advised 'it is unnecessary to mark such lands upon the ground, as it is only the lands available for cultivation and pasture that will be offered for sale in the present stage of the Port Phillip settlement.' Sections 21, 22 and 25 were described as 'Open Plains, Honeysuckle, Light wood and Oaks' and it was to be a further ten years before these sections were fully surveyed and offered for sale.

## Farming

The land purchased by Robert Campbell Jr and fellow Sydney speculators in 1838 was soon leased or sold for farming purposes. Campbell appears to have let his 3,367 acres in the Parish of Keelbundora to small farmers and his tenants were Thomastown and Lalor's first permanent British residents. Their addresses were variously recorded during the 1840s as the Merri Creek, Darebin Creek or Keelbundora.



Robert Campbell Jr. (*The Spirit of Wharf House* by C.E.T. Newman, 1961).

Wheat was the main crop grown along the Merri and Darebin Creeks in the 1840s. A flour mill was erected on the Plenty River at Bundoora during the early 1840s and another on the Merri Creek at Campbellfield by the late 1840s. Oats, barley, potatoes, fruit and vegetables were also grown. Cultivation took place on fertile tracts of black soil suitable for tillage. Stony paddocks were used for grazing, cattle being kept for dairy products and meat, with horses and bullocks for transport and farm work.

During the early 1840s Keelbundora's unsold Sections 21, 22 and 25 were let for grazing purposes to Alexander McKillop via occupation licences. He still held them in 1844, but from 1845 Section 21 was licensed to Horatio Cooper who lived at Norris Bank on Section 20 in today's Bundoora; Section 22 to John Crowe, who presumably farmed an adjoining section owned by Robert Campbell Jr.; and Section 25 to Sampson McWatters. Occupation licences cost £5 per section per year.

## Alexander McKillop

Alexander McKillop (sometimes spelt MacKillop) was born at Lochaber, Scotland in 1812 and arrived in Sydney aboard the bounty ship *Brilliant* in January 1838. He had trained in Rome and Aberdeen to become a priest, but did not continue to ordination, recorded as a schoolteacher when he arrived in Australia. He is said to have found a position with merchants Campbell & Co. and appears to have worked for them at Sydney, Queanbeyan and then Melbourne, after moving there in 1839. Robert Campbell Jr was one of the partners of Campbell & Co.



Alexander McKillop (sosj.org.au).

In April 1840 McKillop purchased 820 acres on the Plenty River in the Parish of Morang for £533. Three months later, he married Flora McDonald at St Francis' Church, Melbourne. Over the next few years he was active in business, community and religious affairs at Port Phillip.

By 1841 he had bought a house at Fitzroy, but shortly after the birth of daughter Mary in January 1842, he was caught up in the economic downturn, having acted as a guarantor with others for businessman William Rucker who became insolvent. As a result, McKillop moved his family to a farm named Duntroon on the Darebin Creek near Thomastown. As Duntroon was the name of the Campbell family's pastoral run near Queanbeyan, Alexander McKillop's farm on the Darebin Creek appears to have been located on land owned by Robert Campbell Jr.

McKillop had leased land on the Darebin Creek as early as 1841. In April 1842 Robert Campbell Jr. sued him for six months unpaid rent on 900 acres. This was either Section 14 (910 acres) or Section 26 (947 acres) in the Parish of Keelbundora. In December 1844 McKillop was reported to be grazing the adjoining unsold Sections 21, 22 and 25 in the Parish of Keelbundora and Sections 4, 9 and 10 of the Parish of Wollert, under an occupation licence granted by the Commissioner for Crown Lands.

McKillop, who had sold his house at Fitzroy in 1842 and land on the Plenty River in 1843, was declared insolvent in January 1844. Robert Campbell Jr sued him again for rent in March 1844. From 1 January 1845 Alexander and his brother Peter leased Leamington, a farm owned by Thomas Dyer Edwards at today's suburb of



Reservoir. Early maps suggest Alexander's house at Reservoir stood on the west bank of the Darebin Creek just north of Plenty Road. Alexander also leased a farm at Merriang during the late 1840s from William Lithgow. By the mid 1850s, however, Alexander McKillop and his family had left the district and he died at Hamilton in 1868. Daughter Mary MacKillop is Australia's only Saint.

## John Crowe

John Crowe was born in Kincardineshire, Scotland in about 1802 and arrived at Port Phillip aboard the *India* in April 1840. He married Agnes Hermeston in Melbourne that year and by March 1841 his address was given as the Merri Creek, where he presumably farmed land owned by Robert Campbell Jr or his brother Charles Campbell.

A meeting of Presbyterian residents on the Merri and Darebin Creeks was held at Campbellfield in March 1842 to discuss the need for a church there and Crowe was elected to a committee to choose a suitable site. Later that year a wattle and daub shingle roofed hut known as Scots Church was completed and served the area until 1855 when it was replaced by the bluestone church which still stands near Sydney Road.

In December 1843 it was reported a shinty match would be held at 'Mr Crow's premises, Campbellfield.' Anywhere within a mile or two east of the Merri Creek could have been classed as Campbellfield during the 1840s and in 1845, his address was again recorded as Merri Creek. From 1845–48 he held an occupation licence for Section 22.

In 1848, when a fire burnt part of his crop, Crowe's address was given as Darebin Creek. He was probably still living in the same place, although could have moved to one of the Campbell family's sections further east. The occupation licence Crowe held on Section 22 may have caused his address to be reported as Darebin Creek. In an era without street numbers, near enough was good enough, as everyone in a neighbourhood knew each other and could direct visitors to the required location.

Crowe was a foundation member of the Port Phillip Farmers' Society when it was established in 1848. In 1851 he purchased land in the Parish of Yuroke, west of Craigieburn, where he died in 1857 aged 54. His widow Agnes later returned to Scotland. The Crows had three children – a daughter Margaret and two sons – John Webster Crowe whose birthplace in 1845 was given as Campbellfield and Robert Colombo Crowe who was born at Darebin Creek in 1849. Both sons later moved to India.

## Sampson McWatters

Sampson McWatters, born in County Armagh, Ireland around 1815, arrived in Sydney in 1836 and had settled in Melbourne by 1842. Described in 1847 as an accountant living at Brunswick, he may have grazed his own cattle on Section 25, which he held from 1845–48, or used it for agistment purposes. In September 1849, during a court case in Melbourne, cattle were said to be grazing 'at Mr McQuater's at the springs between the Merri and the Darebin Creeks; there upon a section there not under anyone's charge.' This was almost certainly Section 25, still referred to as McWatters' even though he no longer held the occupation licence. By 1852 McWatters had moved to Bendigo where he died in 1876.

## Section 22

Section 22 was purchased at the Government auction in Melbourne on 27 September 1848 by speculators Joseph Hall, James Gibbon and John McKenzie for £1,113. The trio received title to their land on 24 November 1848 and in April 1849 divided the 636 acres among themselves. Hall took the southernmost 424 acres located roughly between today's Mahoney's Road and Newton Street and McKenzie the remaining 212 acres north to Main Street. Gibbon did not retain a share.

On 12 April 1850 Hall sold 144 acres to Irishman Peter McCoy for £468. McCoy took ownership on 23 June 1851 suggesting he had paid Hall by then. McCoy may have occupied this land prior to April 1850.

Hall sold his remaining 280 acres for £840 to Michael Mahoney, also from Ireland, who was granted title on 17 December 1852. Mahoney had leased land in Section 13 at Merrilands from Major Alexander Davidson from 1844–49, then when his lease expired, moved across the road which now bears his name. Mahoney had occupied his land in Section 22 for three years before taking ownership.

John Thomas and his son Francis purchased John McKenzie's 212 acres for £689 and were granted title to it on 18 January 1853. Each paid £344/10/– and received 106 acres. The low price suggests the Thomas family had agreed to buy the land prior to the discovery of gold in 1851 and had probably lived there since at least 1850.

John Thomas' land was located between Spring Street and just south of Newton Street. In 1853 he sold 56 acres west of the Edgars Creek to George Dyer, a former shipmate, for £175. John died in 1855 and in 1859, following the death of his wife Mary, his remaining 50 acres was partitioned between their sons John Jr, Joseph, Francis and Alfred. Spring Street was created by the Thomas family as an access road and presumably named for a spring on the Edgars Creek.

Francis Thomas' 106 acres was bounded by today's Main and Spring Streets. He immediately conveyed 71 acres west of the Edgars Creek to brother Joseph and then set about selling most of his remaining land to various market gardeners, shopkeepers and tradesmen. By the mid 1850s the village created on the land purchased by the Thomas family had become known as Thomastown.

## **Section 21**

Section 21 was purchased by Colonel Joseph Anderson, a former Commandant of Norfolk Island, who was granted title to this land on 26 February 1850. An investor, Anderson let his 636 acres, known as Acland's Farm, to Irishman James Lewis. In 1864 Anderson sold Section 21 to Alexander Brock.

## **Section 25**

Section 25, the last unsold section, was purchased by William Westgarth and John Stanley Carr on 6 March 1850 on behalf of newly arrived German and Wendish immigrants. Two days later, Colonel Anderson urged Superintendent La Trobe to make Section 25 a permanent reserve, because of the 'Spring of Water' upon it. He stated that Section 25's 'bad character, being rocky and covered with large stones, [was] not likely ever to be sold by the Government at the present upset price' and would 'afford a right of water to me and others similarly situated' without water.

However, the Germans and Wends were happy to pay the upset price of £1 per acre for Section 25 and had settled there by the end of March 1850. Westgarth and Carr received title to Section 25 on 22 June 1850 and the Germans and Wends then began to subdivide the 640 acres among themselves. Westgarth later wrote 'one amusing feature in the scramble as to allotments was that each tried, in most cases, to get trees, stones, and rocks in preference to clear ground, as if so much additional wealth.' Small quarry holes soon began to appear on the Germans' farms as they happily exploited the bluestone to build their houses, barns, stables, paths and dry stone walls.

Late in 1857, Westgarthtown expanded out of Section 25 when Ludwig Maltzahn leased Section 23 (740 acres) from Robert Campbell Jr. Then in 1858 Christian Ziebell leased Section 24 (770 acres) from Robert Campbell Jr. These large sections continued to be farmed by German settlers until the early 1900s, effectively enlarging Westgarthtown to over 2,000 acres. Many other Germans settled nearby at Epping, Wollert, Mill Park, South Morang, Mernda and Greensborough.



# Martha (née Graff) Johnson of Doreen

BY ROB WUCHATSCH

Martha Johnson, who died in 1977 aged 85, was a remarkable woman who left her 100-acre farm Mount View in Cookes Road, Doreen to Victoria's Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). Today Mount View is fully built on but Graffs Avenue and Graff's Cottage Park recall her family's former presence there. Mount View, valued at the time of Martha's death at \$70,000, was variously reported to have been sold to developers by the RSPCA for either \$14.5 or \$21 million. Why did Martha leave her farm to the RSPCA?

Martha Louise Graff was the youngest child of John Graff and his second wife, Salome (née Metzenthin). She was born at Mount View on 15 June 1891 and baptized by Pastor Herlitz of the Lutheran Church on 27 September 1891. Her godparents were Ernst Schultz of Wollert, August Winter of Westgarthtown and Margaret Dinan.

The Graff family arrived in Australia from Germany in 1850. They were original settlers at Westgarthtown, the German settlement at Thomastown. Salome's parents arrived in South Australia from Germany in 1845 and later moved to Victoria. John and Salome were married at Harkaway in 1877 following the death of John's first wife Auguste (née Reu) in 1876.

John Graff, who had purchased Mount View in the 1860s, died in 1901 and was buried at Westgarthtown. His estate was valued at £4,717, but under a complicated will, most of his assets were placed in trust for his widow, children and grandchildren. At the time of his death, John owned property at Doreen, Westgarthtown, Epping and other places. John's eldest son Charles and his family continued on the old Graff farm at Westgarthtown before later moving away. Charles died in 1942 and Ernest, the other surviving son from the first marriage, had moved to Western Australia by 1903 and died unmarried there in 1924. Salome, her son Herman and daughters Mary, Sarah and Martha remained at Mount View.

Salome Graff died in 1904 when Martha was 13 years old and was buried with her husband, parents and two of her children at Westgarthtown. In 1913, John Graff's executors John Siebel and Albert Wuchatsch put Mount View up for sale and Martha and her sister Sarah purchased it, holding it as joint owners until Sarah's death in 1960. Eldest sister Mary married William Rankin in 1929 and moved to San Remo but died in 1931. Brother Herman Graff married Mabel Hicks in 1929 and lived at Sunnyside in Plenty Road, Mernda near St Joseph's Catholic Church until his death in 1939.



Memorial card for Maria Salome Graff (SLV MS Box 4014/4).





Doreen School pupils, 1940. Marie and Martha Johnson in centre row at right  
(*The Quiet Hills* by J.W. Payne, 1984).



Mount View Farm from the north by John Borrack, 1986 (John Borrack Collection).



Martha Johnson harvesting, December 1940 (State Library Victoria MS Box 4104/4).





Martha Johnson sharpening reaper blades, December 1940 (SLV MS Box 4014/4).

In 1918 Martha married Charles Johnson of Mernda. By the time they separated 20 years later there were three children – Nancy, Martha and Marie – but only Nancy appears to have been fathered by Charles.

Martha continued farming at Mount View for the rest of her life. In December 1940 the *Weekly Times* included two articles about Martha, which noted her 'Skill, Resource and Enterprise' in working a mixed farm by herself.

For 27 years she has worked and managed her 100 acre property, doing all manner of work required from mending harness and machinery to ploughing, drilling and harvesting and on top of this she has supervised the very necessary task of housekeeping. For the last two years she has had no help on the farm at all.

Martha was said to have 'three horses – two light and one medium draught' to pull her farming implements. The *Weekly Times* report continued:

Of particular interest this season is a splendid 10-acre paddock of oats. Estimated to yield two tons to the acre, the crop is a model of evenness, density and freedom from weeds – one of which most men would be proud...when the crop is cut, Mrs. Johnson will have been over it 12 times.





Martha Johnson harnessing her horses, December 1940 (SLV MS Box 4014/4).

It was ploughed twice, harrowed six times, springtoothed, rolled, drilled and harvested. It was sown with three bushels of Algerian oats and 160lb of superphosphate to the acre ... Mrs. Johnson has another 16 acres of oats and 10 acres of wheat – all for hay ... At one time she milked 16 cows on her own, and had as many as 50 pigs on the farm ... At present only five cows are milked.

Martha also grew maize, which she fed to the cows in Autumn, plus peas, daphne and mushrooms which were sold.

As well as farming, Martha's interests included poetry, music, needlework, dressmaking and reading. One of the poems she wrote, *Friends O' Mine*, highlighted her love for working horses, which were essential to her daily farming life.

My horses three, are dear to me,  
And I will tell you why;  
They've toiled for me, for years and years,  
In weather wet and dry.

They've toiled, and sweated day by day,  
In plough-shares heavy chain;  
And oft their shoulder's have been galled  
By labours constant strain.

And so behind your rhythmic step,  
I plodded row on row,  
With just an hour's pause between  
Sunrise, and sunset glow.

And, following the harrows sweep,  
O'er clods I oft did grumble,  
But, never a complaining note  
I ever heard them mumble.

They cannot claim their wages  
By legal rights, and win;  
They cannot ever help themselves,  
Unto the chaffhouse bin.

Their kind are oft-times left to starve,  
And draw the heavy load  
With weakened body, heart and limbs,  
Along life's dreary road.

And now you're aged and like myself;  
The sands of time run low,  
And time and toil have taken toll,  
And made your paces slow.

I feel a pain deep in my heart  
When others murmur low,  
'Why don't you have the beasts destroyed?  
They're useless now, you know!'

But do not fear, my servants dear,  
For what I say is true;  
The faithfulness you've shown to me  
I'll share again with you.

Graze on, graze on, my faithful steeds,  
Through Autumn's fall, and Spring-times prime,  
And Summer's glow, & Winter's snow;  
You're welcome so, Dear Friends O'Mine.

This love of animals, combined with family circumstances, appears to have been the reason Martha Johnson left Mount View to the RSPCA rather than her children.

Martha died at Doreen on 31 May 1977 and was cremated at Fawkner. Her will stipulated that her two unmarried daughters Nancy and Marie could live at Mount View rent free but the property would pass to the RSPCA when they died. However, Martha made no provision for funds to maintain the farmhouse and nor did the RSPCA. *The Age* reported in 2003 that the property was worth \$5 million, but Nancy and Marie, who survived on old age pensions, lived with no running water, no electricity and no phone. Water was drawn from a well. They cooked on a wood stove and their only heat came from the stove and an open fireplace. The house was said to be falling apart, the floor uneven and plywood boards were propped up to stop the rain coming in. In Summer the house was unbearably hot.

Nancy and Marie vacated the farmhouse soon after and the RSPCA sold Mount View for residential subdivision for many millions of dollars. The RSPCA must have come to some financial arrangement with the two sisters. Despite a petition to the City of Whittlesea in 2006 seeking to save the farmhouse, signed by 131 local residents including Nancy and Marie Johnson, neither the developers nor the RSPCA could be persuaded to contribute the necessary funding.

Nancy died at Reservoir in 2012 aged 94 and her personal estate, valued at \$350,000, passed to Marie. When Marie died at Reservoir in 2018 aged 86 she left over \$1 million to the Lost Dogs' Home at North Melbourne.

The remaining daughter Martha, who left home as a teenager during the 1940s and never returned, wrote to me in 1995. She stated:

I left an absolutely terrible family situation at aged 16, never to return ... there was no choice ... in those days to be illegitimate was a terrible thing ... I had my suspicions for some time, I only got proof positive when aged 13. My father, who was a good man, had enough & left when I was 9 ... I decided I would leave too when I was old enough.

She concluded her letter by commenting she thought her mother had put land before people. Had she known about the provisions of her mother's will she might also have said she put animals before people.

The extract below from Martha's will indicates her love of animals:

(c) AFTER the death of the survivor of my said daughters <sup>as</sup> UPON TRUST to the whole of my said freehold property for the ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS of No. 112 Wellington Parade East Melbourne, in Victoria absolutely.

(Martha Johnson's will, PROV)

## Pentridge Volunteer Rifles

BY ROB WUCHATSCH

During the 1860s many Thomastown men, including some from Westgarthtown, served with the Pentridge Volunteer Rifles, a unit of Victoria's defence force. Known members were John, George and Richard Batchelor, George Dyer, Charles Fiedler, Moses Leggatt, James Lewis, Robert Mabey, William Mahoney, James Mooney, Isaac Moore, James Olney, James and Thomas Prescott and Alfred, Francis, John and Joseph Thomas.

The Pentridge Volunteer Rifles was formed in 1859. Drills were held in a paddock until a parade ground was constructed near the Stockade (Pentridge Prison) and soon after a rifle range was added. Volunteers initially paraded in the morning, but later changed to evenings, so they could attend more often. Volunteers served part-time without payment but those who completed five years' service were entitled to a land grant certificate valued at £50. All but one of Thomastown's volunteers are said to have sold their certificates for £45.

Thomastown and Westgarthtown schoolboys Gustav and Robert Hempel, Julius and Louis Peters and Alfred, James and William Thomas were also recruited as members of the Pentridge Volunteer Rifles' drum and fife band and paraded with the unit. They practiced in a small hall behind Mabey's store on the corner of High and Spring Streets at Thomastown.

Some of Thomastown's band members, including Gustav and Robert Hempel, later served as riflemen with the Pentridge Volunteer Rifles (known from 1872 as the Northern Volunteer Rifle Corps). Even after he moved to Arthur's Creek, Robert Hempel continued to serve, riding his horse to and from Coburg. During the 1880s other Thomastown men, including the Olney brothers, served with the Preston Volunteer Rifles. Thomas Prescott's youngest son Walter and Julius Peters' son, also named Julius, served in South Africa during the Boer War.



# Thomastown Mechanics' Institute and Free Library

BY ROB WUCHATSCH

Before 1924, public meetings, celebrations and social gatherings at Thomastown were usually held in the Wesleyan/Methodist and Lutheran churches, Thomastown Primary School, Belmont Hotel, or Wallis' Hall on the corner of Epping Road and Spring Street. The need for a suitable public space led to the formation of a committee during the early 1920s.

At the Shire of Whittlesea's monthly meeting in June 1923, the council considered a letter from my father Norman Wuchatsch, secretary of the hall committee, who wrote soliciting:

a donation towards the building fund of Thomastown Mechanics' Institute and Free Library. Mr. Alec Thomas, a local resident, had donated land for a site, and they had received other generous gifts amounting to £100. The Government had also been approached for financial assistance.

The president said they had power to assist such institutions, and they had a right to do so seeing they were for the benefit of the ratepayers and the public generally. He moved that the secretary be instructed to place £25 on next year's estimates.

In July 1923 the Shire of Whittlesea submitted a plan and specifications for the proposed timber hall to the Health Department for approval. Fundraising continued and in October 1923 a bazaar was held at the Thomastown Primary School. Work on the hall in Spring Street was expected to commence in the near future.

By November 1923 Tom Usher was the hall's secretary and he kept the Health Department informed of progress with its construction. On 16 August 1924 the *Northcote Leader* reported:

The opening of the Thomastown Mechanics' Institute will be celebrated on August 20 by a ball, which promises to be most enjoyable. Perfect arrangements have been made by the Hon. Sec. Mr. T. Usher.



Thomastown Mechanics' Institute, late 1920s (Rob Wuchatsch).



Thomastown school pupils outside Mechanics' Institute, 1925 (Rob Wuchatsch).

The Shire of Whittlesea installed a street lamp outside the Mechanics' Institute in March 1925. In 1928, Frank Leggett advised that when he lit the lamps each night, he put in enough oil to last until midnight. Electric street lights were not installed at Thomastown until 1934.

The Thomastown Primary School used the Mechanics' Institute as a classroom from July to September 1925 while the school was remodelled and renovated. The school paid £1 week rent.

The Thomastown Progress Association was formed on 30 July 1925 and held its first Annual General Meeting in October 1926, presumably at the Mechanics' Institute. Officers elected were as follows: President J. Newton, Vice-Presidents A. Thomas and E. Maltzahn, Secretary P. Blakemore, Treasurer N. Wuchatsch and committeemen L. Borrack, J. McKimmie, J. Mann and N. Thomas. The association met monthly and worked for improvements such as the provision of electricity and water, land for a sports ground, electrification of the railway, more street lighting, tree guards and the widening of Mann's Crossing.

In December 1928, a note appeared in the *Northcote Leader*, as follows:

A grand ball will be held in the Mechanics' Institute, Thomastown, on Boxing night, December 26, in aid of the hall funds. Mr. J. Newton is the President and Mrs. J. Newton is the Hon. Secretary. First-class music will be supplied by Luckman's Band.

The fifth annual ball of the Thomastown Mechanics' Institute and Free Library was held on 13 November 1929. However, disaster struck two months later. The *Herald* of 16 January 1930 reported:

Firemen from Northcote and Preston took two hours to fight a fire which, at 11.56 pm yesterday destroyed the Mechanics' Institute and library at Thomastown.

The building, which was of wood and iron, measured 75 feet by 40 feet, and was well alight when the brigade which was located four miles away was called on the telephone by residents who saw the blaze.

Firemen were handicapped by a poor water supply. A piano in the building was also destroyed. The building was insured with the London and Lancashire Insurance Company for £500 and the piano in the same company for £150.





Arthur Siebel's Band, 1930s (Rob Wuchatsch).

A report in *The Age* of 20 January stated the blaze followed a committee meeting that night but the origin of the fire was unknown. Three days later the *Age* added: the furniture, books and cinematograph plant were also destroyed, and that the loss is not nearly covered by insurance, especially in regard to the moving picture plant, the owner of which is a heavy loser.

In November 1932 Ben Sheffield, secretary of the Building Committee, submitted plans for a new brick Mechanics' Institute. Alec Smart of Thomastown was chosen to build the hall.

On 10 March 1933, the *Northcote Leader* noted that 'Mr. A. Siebel, chairman of the



Ball at Thomastown Mechanics' Institute, 1936 (Bruce Miller).



Mechanics' Institute Committee said that a new hall was being built to replace that destroyed by fire some time ago.' On 21 April 1933 the same newspaper carried a report of the opening of the new hall.

The new building is a fine brick structure and should prove a great asset to the district which has been without a public hall for four years. The function took place on April 11.

The official opening was made the occasion of a fine concert, but after the playing of the National Anthem by the orchestra, Mr. Sheffield introduced Mr. Angliss, M.L.C., to whom was entrusted the responsibility of performing the opening ceremony. At the outset Mr. Angliss was in a reminiscent vein and told of his sentimental attachment to the district. This, as well as being its political representative, gave him an added interest in local activities. He then proceeded to discuss the disabilities under which districts such as Thomastown are laboring at present. Marketing difficulties and low prices made the lot of the primary producer a decidedly unhappy one. In spite of the bad conditions obtaining in Australia, Mr. Angliss was able to show, with illustrative stories, that we were much better off than primary producers in most other countries.

Coming to his duty of the evening, Mr. Angliss congratulated the people of Thomastown on their enterprise in having such a fine hall built in the present difficult times. It was a building that would be a credit to any district and it gave him great pleasure to officially declare the hall open.

A fine concert programme was then proceeded with ... At the conclusion of the concert the secretary (Mr. C.B. Sheffield) announced that a friend had relieved the hall committee from further obligation as to payments on the piano. The chairman (Mr. Albert Siebel) thanked the artists for their efforts and also announced the great opening ball, which will take place on April 26.

William Angliss M.L.C. had married Thomastown-born Bena Grützner in 1919.

Arthur Siebel's band provided the music for the hall's official opening. Arthur played first violin and his band performed at theatres, dance halls and parties. He also taught music and worked for his brother Albert's Pura Dairy at different times. When I asked my mother once why we had no piano stool for our piano, she said my father had donated ours to the rebuilt Mechanics' Institute at Thomastown.

Electricity was connected to the new building in 1934. It would seem that the new Mechanics' Institute did not serve as a free library as all the previous books had been destroyed in the fire.

At the Annual General Meeting held in April 1935 the following office bearers were elected:

President, Mr. R. J. Newton; Vice-Presidents, Messrs. W. Mann and H. Nebel; Secretary and Treasurer, Miss J. McKimmie; Assistant Secretary, Mr. C. Wilton; Auditors, Miss M. Brazil and Mr. H. Nebel; Committee, Mesdames Hirt and Wilton, Misses J. Hirt, H. Thomas and M. Brazil, Messrs. R. Anderson, A. Thomas, A. Siebel, D. Hudson, B. Sheffield, E. Bower, C. Bold and K. Mann.

Dances, euchre nights and balls were all regular events at the hall during the 1930s and 1940s. From 1950–53, the Thomastown Primary School leased it for lessons because of overcrowding and my sister Betty began her schooling there. It was also the venue for school concerts and vaccinations.

In the early 1950s a bio-box for projecting films was erected, but as it did not meet the safety requirements of the Health Department, it was not approved for use until 1957.

My first recollection of the Mechanics' Institute dates back to November 1956 when the Thomastown Lutheran Church held its centenary celebrations there. Many years later my mother told me I ran up and down the aisle carelessly stepping on women's toes. From the late 1950s James Ziebell and I watched films there when it operated as the Ashril Theatre, as well as having guitar lessons. The Thomastown Fidelity Club held activities there, along with Sunday School, scouts, music, dancing, kindergarten and Tae Kwon Do classes. Several Back to Thomastown Reunions were also held there during the 1970s. Owned and operated by the City of Whittlesea since 1987, it is now known as the Spring Street Hall, used by various community groups.



Advertisement for Ashril Theatre in Whittlesea Post, 1957 (SLV Newspaper Collection).



Spring Street Hall, 2023 (Rob Wuchatsch).

## THOMASTOWN LUTHERAN CHURCH SERVICES

Services are held on the fourth Sunday of the month at 2.30 pm at the Thomastown Lutheran Church, German Lane, Lalor. For further details, see the Calvary Lutheran Church website at [www.greensborough.lutheran.org.au](http://www.greensborough.lutheran.org.au).

## VISITING ZIEBELL'S FARMHOUSE

Ziebell's Farmhouse is open on Sunday 10:30 am–3 pm and Tuesday 11.30 am–2 pm.

For enquiries, call 0418 552 557 or [enquiries@westgarthtown.org.au](mailto:enquiries@westgarthtown.org.au)

Tours can be organised for groups of ten or more people. For information and bookings contact 0418 552 557 or [johnsdfry@gmail.com](mailto:johnsdfry@gmail.com)

## FRIENDS OF WESTGARTHTOWN *Newsletter*

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