



St Kilda

by the Sea

Foundation years 1857–1863

St Kilda from Kerry's Belts, Charles Truett, 1863.
Courtesy of La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

St Kilda by the Sea

This exhibition celebrates the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Municipal District of St Kilda in 1857. St Kilda's motto 'aura favente feror' translated as 'borne on a favouring breeze', reflects its relationship to the sea.

The Municipal Institutions Establishment Act was passed in December 1854 and on 24 April 1855 St Kilda was proclaimed a Municipal District. St Kilda was one of the first four municipalities to be established by Proclamation. Unfortunately only the eastern part of St Kilda was proclaimed. The local residents were unhappy with the result and decided against a council.

After agitation by residents for two years, east and west St Kilda were finally united to become a Municipality. The first municipal elections were held on 9 March 1857. On 11 March St Kilda held its first Council meeting. In 1863 it attained the dignity of a Borough and in 1864 the first Mayor was elected.

One of the problems facing the new Council was a lack of funds. Difficulties were caused by the Melbourne City Council pressing for repayment of interest on a loan. The loan had been negotiated in 1853, when St Kilda was part of the Lonsdale Ward, and had been used to develop some of the earliest streets. Despite this and other setbacks in the first years, St Kilda Council busily set about upgrading public facilities and beautifying the local area. The Municipality gradually developed from a swampy wilderness into a pre-eminent Melbourne suburb.

The First People

The earliest inhabitants of the area now known as the City of Port Phillip were the Yalukit Wilam, one of the clans of the Boonerwung people.

Their home territory was extensive and St Kilda was known to them as Yuroe Yuroke, after the red sandstone which was used to shape and sharpen their tools. The area provided a place for gatherings and a plentiful supply of food from the lagoon, swamps and the bay shoreline.

The Naming of St Kilda

The most re-counted story is that of a picnic attended by Charles La Trobe, the Superintendent of the Port Phillip District, in 1841 or early 1842. La Trobe was asked what the place was called and seeing the yacht 'The Lady of St Kilda' at anchor near Point Ormond, suggested the name 'St Kilda'. Wilbraham Liardet a member of the party, recalled 'the well chosen name met with a hearty acclamation of approval followed by a stunning explosion of corks from champagne bottles'.

Green Knoll and Fareham were two earlier names for St Kilda. The first used informally and the other, a name proposed by the authorities and then discarded.

St Kilda—the Place

William Kelly, author of 'Life in Victoria', wrote this description in 1853: 'St Kilda...on elevated ground, washed by the bay waters on one side, and otherwise mostly surrounded by low lying wastes which were flooded...a good many fine trees...and several isolated residences... a few older villas, and houses, neatly and substantially built'.



The yacht, 'Lady of St Kilda', reproduction of a painting by Peter Stromsnas, Sweden, 2004

St Kilda was named after the yacht owned by Sir Thomas Dyke Acland of Devon, England, who purchased it in the 1830s. It is uncertain after whom the yacht was named. Acland had earlier visited St Kilda, an island in the Outer Hebrides, and may have named it after his wife, or after a woman banished to the island in the eighteenth century. In the early 1840s, J.B. Were of Melbourne purchased the yacht and it was often to be seen anchored off Point Ormond. After 1843 nothing more is known of its fate.

Courtesy of Brita Rosen, Sweden

Surveys and Land Sales

Before the Town of Melbourne was officially proclaimed in August 1842, the area known as St Kilda came directly under the jurisdiction of the Government of New South Wales. It was their decision, after the survey by Thomas Nutt early in 1842, to offer at auction a number of sections of Crown Land in the village of St Kilda.

The first auction was carried out in Melbourne on 7 December 1842. The land offered was bounded by the Esplanade, Robe, Grey and Fitzroy Streets. Twenty-two allotments were sold. This area was occupied in 1839 by Captain Benjamin Baxter who had taken out a grazing license to pasture cattle. His run extended from Point Ormond to South Melbourne. Excluded from the sale was a portion of the Esplanade land now Alfred Square, which had been reserved for public use. There were further successful land sales throughout the 1840s.

Crown land was first sold at Elwood in 1851, when six blocks were sold. Later, in August 1859 the land between the railway and the beach, known as West Beach, was offered for sale.

Swamps and marshy land made up large portions of the early settlement at St Kilda. The Western swamp was the northern end of the Albert Park Lagoon, now the Albert Park Lake, and the Southern swamp was the marshy ground which lay over much of the Elwood area.

Access to St Kilda in the 1840s was by punt boat across the Yarra and the scrubby bush track that was to become St Kilda Road.



Fitzroy Street and West St Kilda swamp, c1860

This depiction takes in the view across the open swamp lands of West St Kilda to the other side of Fitzroy Street. The fencing around the swampy area was probably done illegally by the Melbourne and Hobson's Bay Railway Company who continually used this land without permission from the Council. The roofline of Christ Church in Acland Street can be seen in the distance. The building with the roofless veranda further along Fitzroy Street is the Prince of Wales Hotel on the corner of Acland Street.

Agitation, Secession and Elections

When in 1855 the first Proclamation was made to sever St Kilda from Melbourne, the City Council would only relinquish east St Kilda. It maintained jurisdiction over west St Kilda where it had spent a considerable amount of the loan monies and where, if resident action was successful, it would lose the most rate revenue.

This situation caused much friction amongst the residents of both areas. Those living in the eastern portion of St Kilda, outside the Melbourne boundaries, were referred to as the 'Withouts' and those in the western controlled areas were called the 'Withins'.

Agitation grew over a period of nearly two years, culminating in a new Proclamation in early 1857 which included all of St Kilda. A meeting was held on 7 March 1857 at Alfred Wheatley's premises in Acland Street to select candidates. The election was held on 9 March 1857 at the Junction Hotel where 3822 votes were cast.

The following were elected from 14 candidates:

Benjamin Cowderoy, broker
Alexander Fraser, auctioneer
Alexander Sutherland, machine merchant
Thomas Hale, architect
Joshua Mooney, livery stable keeper
Frederick Spicer, surgeon
Samuel Marshall, timber merchant

At the Council's first meeting on 11 March 1857, Benjamin Cowderoy was elected Chairman. A decision was made that Council meetings were to be held weekly. A short while later William Goldie was appointed Town Clerk, and Sydney W. Smith, Town Surveyor.



Benjamin Cowderoy, Mayor of St Kilda

Benjamin Cowderoy arrived in Port Phillip in 1853. Soon after arriving he became a partner in the Victorian Freehold Land Society with Frederick Sargood. In 1857 he was elected to the St Kilda Council, becoming its first Chairman. For a great many years he acted as Government Valuer to both the Railway Department and the Victorian Probate Office. On leaving the Council he was presented with a handsome testimonial and a purse of sovereigns, given to him by the residents of St Kilda.

Port Phillip City Collection sk0464

The First St Kilda Council

On 11 March 1857, the first Council meeting took place at the Junction Hotel. Having no fixed meeting place, the Council gained Government permission for future meetings to be held at the Police Court house across the road from the hotel. It became a priority for the Council to erect municipal chambers as soon as possible. By the end of 1859 the original St Kilda Town Hall was erected on the corner of Grey and Barkly Streets.

The first Council had to contend with a variety of problems. Paramount amongst them was the drainage of the district. The Council received a continuous stream of petitions and complaints from residents about stormwater damage and lack of drainage in streets and across properties.

A major problem was the unsanitary state of the municipality. The Health Officer complained, 'I was shocked at the state of many of the premises we visited...The most prevalent and offensive were the privies and water closets. Which...were not only overflowing but impregnating the ground round them with offensive effluvia'.

Within a few years St Kilda Council constructed twenty four miles of roadway and six miles of red gum kerbing. Further works included the construction of a portion of the main drain, filling gravel pits and removing tree stumps. A pound for wandering cattle had been opened in Alma Road in 1858, and by 1862 an abattoir had been established in Elwood.

The success of the early Council in making St Kilda a habitable residential suburb is demonstrated by the great increase in population. It grew from 2,700 residents in 1857 to 6,411 by 1861.



Group of Councillors, 1861-1862

A group of St Kilda Councillors elected in 1861. Standing (left to right) Cr James Mason, publican, Wellington Street. Cr Edward Sydes, merchant, Dalgety Street.. Seated are Cr. Brice Frederick Bunny, barrister Inkerman Street, Cr Florence Gardiner, produce merchant, High Street, Cr. Benjamin Cowderoy, broker and valuator, Acland Street, and Cr Henry Tullett, ironmonger Grey Street. Missing from the photograph is Cr John M. Thomas, chemist Robe Street.



Silver Trowel, 1859.

This trowel was used to lay the foundation stone of the original St Kilda Town Hall, 12 July 1859

Port Phillip City Collection sk0758

Life in Early St Kilda

From the first land sales St Kilda grew steadily, attracting many of the most influential and wealthy people of Melbourne. In 1852 newcomer Emily Childers, wife of Hugh Eardley Childers, wrote: 'We have taken a furnished cottage in St Kilda...Hugh is living among the class of people who were most likely to...help further his career. Mrs Williams whose husband is a barrister and Mr Pohlman...the judge... We hope soon to know Mr and Mrs Browne... a great part of St Kilda belongs to him'.

To cater for religious and educational needs six churches, numerous private schools and a National school were established between 1854 and 1860.

The opening of the original Town Hall on the corner of Barkly and Grey Streets at the end of 1859 gave a new impetus to the social activities in the district. The St Kilda Gardens, designed by Tilman Gloystein, were opened to an appreciative public in 1862.

Sporting life was not neglected. Cricket, archery, swimming and horse racing were popular past times. In 1853 the St Kilda Cup was run on a bush course near the Village Belle Hotel with patrons coming to blows over the outcome of the races.

A number of volunteer organisations were formed; a Fire Brigade in 1857, a Rifle Corps in 1859 and the St Kilda Ladies Benevolent Society in 1859.

Public amenities were upgraded. In 1859 gas replaced oil for street lighting. New lamps were to be lit at sunset and extinguished at two o'clock in the morning. Early in 1860 Yan Yean water was laid on and a stand pipe installed near the Greyhound Hotel in Carlisle Street.



The First St Kilda Jetty and Kennedy's Bathing ship, 1855

The painting represents the foreshore area in 1854 and shows the original pier, which consisted of an embankment of wooden stakes filled with earth, leading to a short wooden jetty. This rudimentary pier was destroyed in a storm. A replacement pier was constructed in 1858. The bathing ship is beyond the pier. In the distance a large number of ships can be seen off Sandridge (Port Melbourne).

Port Phillip City Collection

Sk2000.0.2.409



Summerland House, corner Acland and Fitzroy Streets, c1861

The house was stuccoed brick, with fourteen rooms, stables, a coach house, and an enclosed garden. Robert Bennett and his wife, pictured on the balcony, lived here from 1855. Bennett, a stone mason and builder, arrived in Melbourne in 1842. He became a Melbourne City Councillor in 1853, a Member of Parliament in 1857 and Lord Mayor of Melbourne in 1861.

Port Phillip City Collection sk0604



The Royal Hotel c1863

This was St Kilda's most famous early hotel. It was located on the corner of Robe Street and the Esplanade. James Mooney was the proprietor and his brother, Councillor Joshua Mooney, leased the livery stables attached. The hotel in the picture was built in 1853, with the earlier section in built in 1847. In 1855 the hotel was described as a three storey brick hotel with thirty-one rooms and a billiard room. The whole property was valued at one thousand pounds. The Gymnasium was erected in 1861.

Port Phillip City Collection
sk0609



W. H. Excell Draper and Hosier, c1862

This shop was in a prime retail position at number one Wellington Street on the corner of Punt Road (Barkly Street after 1857). William Henry Excell ran his business on this site from 1859. The shop seems to have been well patronised and merchandise plentiful. The business is a cluster of wooden buildings and the family home is the large square brick house facing Wellington Street. Next door was Roberski and Eckersley, grocers, wine and spirit merchants.

Port Phillip City Collection sk0607

Centenary of St Kilda Council 1957

The Centenary of the Municipality of St Kilda was celebrated with a number of events.

A special meeting of the Council was held at eight o'clock on Monday 11 March 1957, in the main Hall of the St Kilda City Hall. Victorian parliamentarians and former members of the Council were invited guests. On the same day, a commemorative tablet was unveiled in the foyer of the St Kilda City Hall.

An exhibition of photographs and other memorabilia documenting the history of the Municipality was held in the upstairs reception room at the St Kilda City Hall.

A mayoral debutante ball was held in the St Kilda City Hall on 21 June to celebrate the Centenary. Ten debutantes made their curtsy at the ball. Around 1200 guests were invited by the Mayor and Mayoress of St Kilda, Councillor and Mrs P.W. Stynes. The guest list included Sir Archie Michaelis whose family had resided in St Kilda since the 1850s.

Preparations for the Centenary mayoral debutante ball were in the hands of the Town Clerk, William Greaves. The correspondence generated by the coordination of the event was extensive. This included dealing with various ticketing issues, such as residents requesting tickets over and above the capacity of the hall. Twenty-seven gallons of beer were provided and all of the liquor supplied on the night was paid for by the Mayor.

PRESENTATION NIGHT



Debutantes at the St Kilda Centenary Ball held in the St Kilda City Hall, 21 June 1957

Judy Shaw, pictured in the centre, makes a practice curtsey, while the other debutantes look on. Pictured from left to right are: Lynette Peterson, Wendy Secull, Hilda Waters, Judith Arrell, Faye Warren, Judy Mason, Joyce Turner, Wendy Ryan and Sandra Shaw.

Port Phillip Library Services collection

Old-World Scene

An 18th century reception room was depicted on the stage of the St. Kilda town hall for the mayoral ball last night. An island and platform between the two dance floors was decorated with a display of poinsettias, cyclamen and primulas, with exotic foliage, and plants and ferns as a background.

A blue and silver French brocade gown with a swathed bodice and a full-flared skirt was worn by the mayoress, Mrs. P. W. Stynes, who carried a bouquet of cyclamen, as she and her husband received the ten young debutantes.

The debutantes were dressed in waltz-length bouffant frocks with Swiss embroidered V necklines of velvet embossed white nylon over ice blue taffeta, and they carried bouquets of blue water lilies and forget-me-nots.

They were Judith and Sandra Shaw, nieces of the mayor and mayoress, Judith Mason, Lynette Peterson, Wendy Secull, Faye Warren, Judith Arrell, Wendy Ryan, Hilda Waters and Joyce Turner.