

# 23

**Jackson's Manor Backpackers  
(Wattle House and The Wattles),  
53 Jackson Street,  
St Kilda**



*The architect Samuel Jackson and his wife on the verandah of the Wattle House, St Kilda, c1860*  
By permission from John Playfoot Fine Art Pty Ltd

## **Samuel Jackson and earliest Melbourne**

St Kilda has surviving buildings by Melbourne's three earliest architects: Robert Russell (1808-1900) who probably designed the earliest section of the Elsternwick Hotel (39) and his firm Russell, Watts & Pritchard who designed Elwood House (40), John Gill (c1797-1866) whose Barham House (1850) is concealed within Eildon (24) and Samuel Jackson (1807-76) whose own house survives here in Jackson Street.

Russell's earliest surviving building in Melbourne is St James' Anglican Old Cathedral, 419-435 King Street (1839-51) which was relocated there stone by stone from its original site in King Street, but Jackson's, and indeed Melbourne's earliest surviving building on its original site, is St Francis' Roman Catholic Church (1841-45 & 1849), which has been heavily and continuously used since the day it opened on 22 May 1842.

Samuel Jackson was born in England, the eldest of three brothers who in 1829 when he was aged 21, all immigrated to Hobart, in Van Diemen's Land. In England, Jackson had been a builder; in Tasmania he turned his hand to design as well, employing his brothers as carpenters and three of his buildings survive in Hobart. In 1835 he joined the John Pascoe Fawkner syndicate and crossed to the site of Melbourne from Launceston in 1835, soon after Fawkner and Russell. He first established a pastoral property near Sunbury and then returned to the practice of architecture.

In 1840, Jackson opened a part-time office in Little Collins Street, which was responsible for more significant buildings than any other architect prior to the Gold Rush, although many no longer survive. He was the designer of Scots' Church, Collins Street (corner of Russell Street, 1841-42, demolished in 1873 to enable construction of the present Scots'); St Patrick's Church (1850, predecessor of the present Cathedral); St Mary's, Geelong (1846); St Patrick's Hall (Victoria's first Legislative Assembly, demolished); the first Melbourne Hospital (1848, demolished); Charnwood, St Kilda the house for Octavius Browne (1855, demolished); Fairlie, Colonel Anderson's house, South Yarra (1846); 'Tower House'; St Paul's Church, Pentridge (Coburg, 1851-53) and Toorak House (1848-50, now the Swedish Church).

With Russell, he entered the 1844 competition for the first Princes' Bridge, but they received second prize, despite the winner, Charles Laing not fulfilling the competition conditions: not the last time for such a dubious practice in Melbourne.

As a building designer without architectural training, Russell's designs are unaffected and provincial, even naive. His details are difficult to source, but generally Gothic and Picturesque. The ornament of St Francis recalls the Commissioners' Gothic churches, which Jackson may well have experienced as a builder in London. These were cheap functional decorated halls of rendered and painted brickwork, with a very basic interior that included a gallery on cast iron columns, to house as large a congregation as possible, eg: St Paul's Church, The Ridgeway, Mill Hill, London (1829) designed by Samuel Hood Page for William Wilberforce, with very plain pinnacles and a ribbed plaster vaulted ceiling.

Samuel Jackson also painted one of the most important relics of early Melbourne - a panorama of the town on 30 July 1841, which is now in the La Trobe Collection of the State Library of Victoria.

### **Samuel Jackson at Wattle House**

Jackson had moved to Acland Street by 1845 and with F G Dalgety and H F Gurner (26), he purchased his property at the second Crown Land sale in St Kilda in 1846. He is listed in the 1847 *Port Phillip Directory* as 'Samuel Jackson Architect, St Kilda' and for Professor Miles Lewis this is sufficient to date Wattle House as 'c1847.' It is the oldest surviving building in St Kilda.

Professor Lewis, Australia's principal expert on prefabricated buildings, has confirmed that Wattle House is not, as is often claimed, prefabricated. This story may have derived from the fact that there was a prefabricated building at Wattle House, but erected later than the house and now demolished. Russell probably derived his design from architectural Pattern Books in Lewis's opinion, most likely J H Brooks, *Designs for Cottage and Villa Architecture*, London c1839.

The two early surviving paintings of Wattle House very revealing: both are by unknown artists, one from c1865-c1866 and viewed from the north, from what is now Jackson Street like the photograph. This image was once said to be by Eugene von Geurard, but now is known not to be. The second is the charming work on the cover of this book, viewed from the south, which is said to be c1860, but must be nearer c1870.

They both depict Jackson's design as particularly Romantic in a Picturesque Gothic, or Cottage Ornée manner.

It is partly two-storied and its steeply pitched gabled roofs have Tudor details, with very decorative fretwork barge and finials, decorative timbering in stellar and lozenge patterns and small-paned casement windows. It is a generally single-storied building complex consisting of two attached gabled pavilions, of which the first is two-storied with two attached gabled wings and a gabled porch with a Tudor archway to the south. The second pavilion is wider, and a third pavilion, possibly the detached kitchen is linked by a verandah, or covered way. At right angles is a detached fourth gabled pavilion, linked to the kitchen by a fence.

The second image must be later than 1866, because the second attached pavilion has had a second storey added. In the photo, a gabled entry has also been added in the northwest corner, a bay window to the north of the second pavilion and a major more recent addition to the east. There are massive chimneys with corbelled tops, the one on the west elevation with diamond-shaped flues, an oriel window and decoratively fretted barge. To the north is a substantial picket fence and gates with three gateposts.

A fascinating technical detail is that the roof of Wattle House is still partially clad with Morewood & Rogers' iron roof tiles. Today these are very rare in Victoria, but Berkley Hall's stables (26) have them and formerly, so did the stables of Fenagh Cottage (25). Galvanised iron tiles reached Victoria as a patent method of roofing from 1850 and were used for about twenty years. They are about 900 x 575 mm and were screw-fixed to the roof frame over half-round timber rolls, as an over-locking sealing device between the tiles. Morewood and Rogers tiles were the earliest and most common, preceded only by those from Morewood & Co, and were imported from their factory, which was in what is now leafy suburban Gospel Oak in North London.



Wattle House, St Kilda, c1865-c66, artist unknown [not Von Guerard], drawing with wash, State Library of Victoria, clearly showing the Morewood & Rogers' iron roof tiles

Jackson was a foundation member of the Victorian Architects' Association in May 1851, predecessor of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects and now the RAIA Victorian Chapter.

By 1851, St Kilda consisted of a sparsely separated group of 20 substantial houses. Of these, only two: Eildon (then known as Barham House, 1850, **24**) and Wattle House survive, but there is also a row of rough stone cottages at 16-22 Acland Street, cnr St Leonards Avenue (**11**) whose present appearance is concealed beneath the accretion of subsequent renovations, which certainly appear on Kearny's 1855 map and may have been built in the 1840s.

After the Gold Rush, Jackson retired from architecture to his 81-hectare property at St Kilda, between Fitzroy, Acland and Grey Streets which still known in the 1870s as Wattle Paddock. In 1853 Dalgety, Gurner and Jackson took advantage of the new golden wealth and the desirability of St Kilda to subdivide their properties on the St Kilda Hill at profits almost 40 times their initial purchase prices and ten years later there were 6,363 residents in St Kilda.

So early in 1863, Jackson returned to England a wealthy man, where he married a widow and fathered a daughter, Mary Anne. On 7 May 1876 he died at Enfield, Middlesex, north of London, leaving a large estate and he is buried in Highgate Cemetery, North London. Indeed in St Kilda, Enfield Street runs off



Former Wattle House, 2004

Jackson Street. His fine Georgian mansion that he touchingly named Yarra House, almost certainly no longer survives in Baker Street, Enfield, which today is best known for its splendid sequence of Edwardian pubs.

### **School at Wattle House**

But Jackson still owned Wattle House and in late 1863 (another source gives 1858, others 1867) Sophia Matilda Murphy leased Wattle House from him and relocated her flourishing girls' school there. It is unclear where it was previously. She was the sister of Frances Kerr, who was married to J H Kerr, the author of *Glimpses of Life in Victoria*. Her secular private girls' school is said to be one of the earliest in Australia. Oberwyl (27) was a girls' school also from 1867-1931, The Priory (28) from 1872 and St Michael's (9, 30) in 1895; only Hofwyl House was for boys (1866-1900s, 44). There were also two denominational girls schools: St Michael's (9, 30, from 1895) which is Church of England and only recently became co-educational and the Chislehurst Cromarty School for Girls from 1909-10 (45) was Roman Catholic.

In June 1874, J H Kerr died, and his widow, Frances went to live with her sister at Wattle House and it appears that eventually, four Murphy sisters ran the school. They had all immigrated to Australia from England, with their mother. Mrs C J (Annie) Rowe in 1933, who as A Gray of Nareeb Nareeb was a pupil at Wattle House in 1870 and 63 years later donated the c1865-6 watercolour image to the State Library and was pupil there in 1870, confirmed that the Misses Murphy ran the school. A letter also survives in the Clyde Company Papers, in which Miss S Matilda Murphy of Wattle House wrote to a George Russell on 11 October 1870, regarding (his daughter?) Christina, returning to classes in Drawing and Italian. When the Murphy sisters eventually returned to England, a memorial window was installed at Christ Church, St Kilda in 1880, in their honour.

In June 1878, Samuel Jackson's daughter, Mary Ann Lawson, arranged for Wattle House to be auctioned. The auction notice describes the house as mostly brick, '...being equal to new, the outside wooden portion, would only have to be taken down and the whole building, at moderate cost could be restored in brick to its original, much-loved design.

### **Alfred Felton at Wattle House**

It was auctioned for a second time in 1884: 'nine rooms in the main building, [and] three-roomed wooden annexe [that was still there]...' Then Alfred Felton (1882-1904, 14) bought it and engaged an architect [J W?] Roberts, who was active from 1881-7, mainly designing commercial buildings. Felton erected a tower, not discernable today and even considered renaming the house Wattle Towers, but wisely decided against such an affectation. He noted that Roberts' design was so complicated as to require ten separate roofs, including 20 gables and the tower.

By late 1884, Felton was 'fed up' with Roberts' slow progress, though he persisted and by May 1885, was ready to move in. Felton's Wattle House boasted an elegant hall, a large drawing room, dining room, library, 'snuggery,' billiard room, four bedrooms, kitchen, servants' hall, two servants' bedrooms, scullery, pantry, a very large cellar and extensive grounds. But, for some reason, in January 1888 Felton auctioned it, that is four years before he moved into the Esplanade Hotel. At that time, it was surrounded by a 'large, beautiful fernery, large greenhouse, forcing houses, lawn tennis [court], with kiosk'. By the late nineteenth century it was also known on the MMBW Plan as 'The Wattles.'

### **Wattle House in later life**

In 1888, the painter Jan Hendrick Scheltema (1861-1938) best known for works depicting livestock in scenic landscapes, emigrated from the Netherlands in c1890, to live and work from a studio in a house in Jackson Street (the precise address is unknown). He made a deal with Charles Rolando (died 1893), a

painter from Florence who had an English wife, that they would work together and jointly sign their works. These are the earliest known artists to be painting in St Kilda. Today, the eminent artist, Peter Booth works from Enfield Street, off Jackson Street.

Sir George Houston Reid MHR (1845-1918), first Leader of the Opposition in Australia, 1901-1904 briefly leased Wattle House, presumably because federal parliament was sitting in Melbourne. He was Prime Minister 1904-5 and from 1916-18 a member of the House of Commons, the only Australian ever to have sat in Colonial (NSW), Commonwealth and Westminster Parliaments.

In 1968-70, Doug and Dorothy McDade, with their young daughter Mandy acquired Wattle House, which had by then become decrepit and possibly a brothel. They renovated it as a pleasant guesthouse. Dorothy painted from a studio in the basement. The McDades also owned Hampton House, another guesthouse, facing the end of Jackson Street.

Later Wattle House became a boarding house and then a Special Accommodation House and a large addition was built at the rear. As Jackson's Manor, Wattle House is now relegated to a busy, if not onerous life as a 'backpackers' hostel,' offering, it's advertisement insists, 'quality accommodation' for 110 people from \$19 a night.

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*Wattle House, St Kilda, Melbourne*, drawing with wash, State Library of Victoria, H3411, title handwritten in black ink beneath the image, undated c1865-66, artist unknown, incorrectly attributed to Eugene Von Guerard, gift from Mrs C J (Annie) Rowe in 1933, who as A Gray of Nareeb Nareeb was a pupil at Wattle House in 1870. Information on Wattle House accompanying the image [partially incorrect] is handwritten in black ink.

