

Carlton Community History Group

Carlton Chronicles

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The Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880

The Melbourne International Exhibition, held from October 1880 to April 1881, was the first industrial World Fair to be held in the Southern Hemisphere. It was an important event for Victoria that showcased the wealth and innovation of the colony, post the gold rush. The building that was constructed to house it still stands in Carlton, now called the Royal Exhibition Building. Designed by noted architect Joseph Reed and built by David Mitchell, the father of Dame Nelly Melba, it featured a dome inspired



The display of British products at the Melbourne International Exhibition in 1880-81. (Photo: State Library of Victoria).

by the famous Duomo in Venice. The official opening of the exhibition on 1 October 1880 was a major event that was accompanied by a procession through the city.

From an early hour could be seen large masses of people coming into the city from all quarters, and at eleven o'clock in the day there could not have been fewer than 100,000 people in the main thoroughfares of the city as they concentrated in the streets along which the procession wound. The procession itself was the largest and most imposing that has ever marched through the streets of Melbourne. (*The Age*, 2 October 1880, page 5).

The opening ceremony inside the building was attended by officials, politicians and “officers of various grades, naval, military and consular” according to the report in *The Age*. The Governor formally declared the Exhibition open, the Royal Standard was hoisted over the dome, a salute was fired from ships in the Bay, and the orchestra and chorus performed the National Anthem.

During the eight months in which it was open, the exhibition attracted an estimated total of 1.3 million visitors, a remarkable number seeing that Victoria’s population at the time was only 900,000 and Melbourne’s about 300,000. The exhibition showcased over 32,000 products from 33 countries, including innovations in technology, art and industry. Among the products exhibited were the latest agricultural machinery from the USA, armaments from Germany, and various natural products from the South Pacific region. They also included products manufactured here in Victoria. A report in *The Age* picked out a few of the more interesting of these, including the products of Mr. Alexander Bryce of Lygon Street, Carlton, who manufactured hair and clothing brushes of a superior quality. The

report noted that: "The contents of this case will surprise many, as few knew that this class of brushware is produced in Victoria, especially of such excellence".

The Royal Exhibition Building and its surroundings are now recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage site because it is the most authentic remaining example of an *in situ* Palace of Industry from a significant international exhibition.

A crime of passion

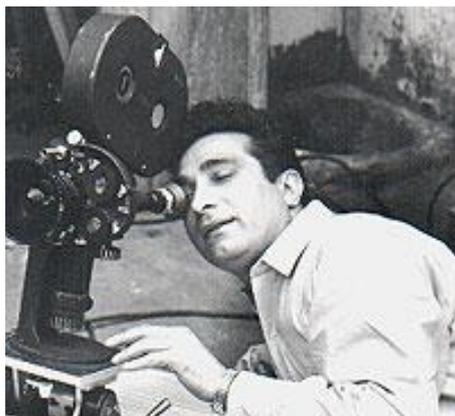
In 1880, at the time of the Melbourne International Exhibition, the middle terrace house in the group of three shown in the photo at right, 197 Drummond Street, was occupied by James Greer, a young Irishman, his wife and 18 month old son. Twenty two year old Mrs Greer, who was of French extraction and spoke fluent French, had apparently become infatuated with a member of the French Exhibition Commission, Monsieur Soudry, who had come to Melbourne in connection with the Melbourne International Exhibition being held in the nearby newly completed Exhibition Building. In a fit of jealousy, Greer shot his wife and her supposed lover and then himself when they were all at the opera together one evening. One week later, Greer died of his wounds, but the other two survived.



Illustrated Talk by Zoom:

"Carlton through the eyes of filmmaker Giorgio Mangiamele"

Tuesday evening, 17 March 2026, at
7.30pm



Enjoy this interesting presentation from the comfort of your own home. To take part in this Zoom presentation you will need to register, which can be done by emailing jeffann@bigpond.net.au. A link will be sent to you on the day before the presentation.



Behind the Lines

The year in political cartoons
Old Treasury Building, Spring Street.
2 March to 3 May 2026

All the twists and turns of another turbulent year in Australian politics. Drawing inspiration from the world of movie making, this year's exhibition features 45 of Australia's finest political cartoonists. Together, the works create a time capsule of the political year, presenting multiple viewpoints side-by-side and inviting audiences to grapple with diverse, and at times conflicting, interpretations.

The story of a corner shop

On the corner of Canning and Macpherson Streets in North Carlton is a 19th century building that was once a corner shop. On its parapet are the words "C. Pescia's Buildings". Carlo Pescia was one of the many Swiss Italians from the canton of Ticino in southern Switzerland, who came to Victoria during the gold rush and settled in the area around Daylesford. Carlo was naturalized in Daylesford in April 1865. In 1874 he married Johanna Shanahan.

By 1880 Carlo and Johanna were living in Carlton and Carlo (listed in rate books under the anglicised name "Charles") had a grocer's shop in Rathdowne Street. The three-roomed brick shop was a rental property, near the junction of Kay and Neill streets. A year later, in 1881, the Pescias invested in real estate further north. Johanna became the registered owner of vacant land on the corner of Canning and Macpherson streets, North Carlton. A new corner shop (now numbered 435 Canning Street) was built there and was ready for business in 1883. In March 1884, Carlo Pescia advertised the sale of the "best quality bread at fourpence the four pound loaf". The house around the corner (now numbered 68 Macpherson Street) was built in 1887. Carlo also had a business interest in the city and applied for a colonial wine licence for rented premises in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne.

In December 1893 Carlo applied for a colonial wine licence so he could sell a selection of wines alongside his grocery items at the Canning Street shop. While he had successfully held a licence for the Lonsdale Street premises, he faced stiff opposition from over 500 local residents in North Carlton, including members of the temperance movement. The grocer's shop was diagonally opposite the North Carlton Baptist Church and there was a dancing school nearby. The availability of wine for sale in the neighbourhood was considered unsuitable for church-goers and impressionable young dance students. There were also unfounded claims that "an Italian" was going to open a hotel in Canning Street, and this could be seen as detrimental to the business of existing local hotels. The licence application was refused in this case, and another application a year later in December 1894 was also refused. Carlo ran into trouble in June 1897, when he was fined £25, plus costs, for selling liquor without a licence. He was acting as an agent for a country vigneron and had misinterpreted the volume of liquor he was permitted to sell. Six months later, in December 1897, he optimistically applied for a colonial wine licence and, once again, it was knocked back.



(Photo: CCHG)

Meanwhile, the grocery shop in Canning Street was leased to John Richards & Sons, and when the lease expired in 1910, the whole property, including the adjacent house in Macpherson Street, was sold to Henry Philp. The building has had a variety of business uses during its history, including a dairy produce merchant, a confectioner and a fruiterer. It is now a naturopath's practice and private residence.

In the early 1900s Carlo had a confectioner's shop in Sydney Road, Brunswick. In 1906, he suffered a foot injury when he was hit by a dairy cart in Sydney Road. Carlo and Johanna then lived for a few years in Faraday Street, Carlton and McIlwraith Street, Princes Hill. They moved back to Daylesford, where they spent their final years. Carlo Pescia died on New Year's Eve in 1916 and his widow Johanna in June 1929.

Carlton personality – Dinny O’Brien, the ‘Bottle-O’

A well-known and colourful character around the streets of Carlton in the 1960s and 1970s was Dinny O’Brien, the bottle collector. With his horse and cart, he would go up and down the streets calling out ‘bottle-o, bottle-o, bottle-o’. People who had old bottles would come out and sell them to him. For beer bottles he would pay six pence a dozen, and then sell them to a bottle yard for ten pence a dozen. The bottle yard then sold them back to the breweries.

Dinny was born in 1905 in the small hamlet of Spring Mount, near Creswick, where his father was a publican and dealer in horses and cattle. In 1920, when Dinny was 15, his father moved the family of sixteen children to Carlton. In order to accommodate such a big family, they had to buy two adjoining wooden cottages. This was in Charles Street, a small back street that runs off Kay Street between Rathdowne and Canning Streets. For ten years Dinny worked at a chemical manufacturing works, until 1930 when the economic depression led to him being laid off. Out of work at a time when jobs were hard to find, he decided to go into business for himself. He acquired a horse and cart and started selling firewood from a wood yard that he established in the unusually large back yard behind the cottages at 24 Charles Street. The firewood was sent down by rail from Nagambie in central Victoria to the siding at the North Fitzroy station, on the now defunct Inner Circle Line, and from there he would transport it to the Charles Street yard.

These were the years of the economic depression in the 1930s and times were tough. “I didn’t make much money to tell the truth”, he said in a 1985 interview. “Nor did most people. Often families were



Dinny O’Brien, well-known bottle collector in Carlton. On the side of his cart, he has written: “The horse’s prayer to my master. Always give me plenty to eat and drink and a clean bed to lie on. Keep me well [illegible] at my harness. Don’t whip me when I am going uphill. Protect me from the wind and rain, and speak to me as I am a dumb animal. Thank you, my master”.

reduced to doing a ‘midnight flit’ when they fell behind in their rent”. Late one night a man called on Dinny saying that he had to get out of the house and asked how much it would be to move all his furniture. He moved him for a small fee. As a result, Dinny acquired a furniture lorry, and was kept busy with the wood and with shifting people. Soon the yard in Charles Street was too small, and he had to rent a larger place nearby in Neill Street. (A small lane off Neill Street is now named O’Brien Place after him).

Dinny also began to collect bottles, and applied for a licence to do this from the Carlton Police Station. “You

couldn’t go in and ask, are your bottles for sale - that was the law then. You’d have your days and people would know. I just sang out ‘bottle-o’ and the kids would come out. You’d see them on the fence singing out to you”.

In his later years Dinny and his wife lived at 466 Canning Street, North Carlton. His horse was stabled at the corner of Newry and Canning Streets, and he remembered how each morning as he walked across Curtain Square his horse would hear him coming and would sing out. “Oh, he was a lovely horse, he’d follow you anywhere. I’d fix his feed, clean the stable, yoke him up to the lorry and away we’d be off”. Dinny died in 1986, aged 80, at his house in Canning Street.

Ten-year anniversary

This edition of 'Carlton Chronicles' marks ten years since the first edition (then called 'Newsletter') was published in April 2016. To mark this anniversary, we are returning here to an issue covered in that first edition, women from Carlton who served as nurses during the First World War.

Nurses from Carlton in the First World War

During the First World War, more than 2,000 Australian women served as nurses overseas. For acceptance into the Australian Army Nursing Service, they had to have at least three years' nursing experience, be aged between 21 and 45 years, and be either single or widowed. Of those 2,000, ten gave a Carlton address as their own or that of their next of kin when enlisting. These are the stories of two of them.

Helen Condon served as a nurse in India, and died there. She was born in Parkville the daughter of Irish parents, and completed four years of nursing training at St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne. When she enlisted in April 1917 she was in her early 30s. Both of her parents were by then deceased, so she named as next of kin her brother James who was the licensee of the Great Northern Hotel at the corner of Rathdowne and Pigdon Streets, North Carlton. She was posted to India, to the 34th Welsh General Hospital at Deolali, five hours travel from Bombay. Large and rambling, this was the biggest of the Indian military hospitals with some 3,000 beds. Although far from the fighting in Europe, it was nevertheless a difficult posting, due to the debilitating tropical climate, the prevalence of snakes, and cultural and language problems with Indian orderlies and Turkish patients evacuated from Mesopotamia (Iraq). Helen appears to have served in that hospital for more than 18 months. By early 1919, with the war over, the nurses in India were preparing to return to Australia - but Helen stayed on. In February 1919 she had married an Englishman, Captain Cecil John Howell of the Buffs (East Kent) Regiment, in St Patrick's Church, Deolali. The couple continued to live in Deolali, where a son Peter John was born a year after their marriage. This new life was however not to last as on 10 October 1925 Helen died at Madura, India. The following month, her bereaved husband and five-year-old son returned to London.

Isabel Ogilvie served on the frontline in France. She was born in Walhalla in eastern Victoria, but when she was a teenager her widowed mother moved the family to Carlton, living at various addresses. She completed



An Australian nurse in India during the First World War. (Photo: Australian War Memorial)



(Photo: Alice Kitchin, State Library of Victoria)

three years nursing training at the Austin Hospital and in April 1917, aged 31, enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service. Isabel embarked for overseas service on the hospital ship *Karoola*, and disembarked in the UK in mid-June. By early July she was in France attached first to the 25th General Hospital. In November 1917 she was transferred to the 43rd Casualty Clearing Station, a front-line placement which would have involved very challenging work. Perhaps nurses were rotated in such positions, for after a month she was returned to the 25th General Hospital. During 1918, in February and October, Isabel had two periods of fortnightly leave in England. By early 1919 she was herself in hospital, suffering from 'debility', but returned to duty in March 1919. Soon afterwards she was transferred to the 2nd Australian Auxiliary Hospital in England, where most of the patients would have been convalescent. Isabel returned to Australia as part of the nursing staff on the *Kildonian Castle*, and was discharged from duty as medically unfit in May 1919. After her return she lived with her mother and adult siblings at 90 Fenwick Street, North Carlton. In 1920 she married William Hayden Prime at the Erskine Presbyterian Church, then on the corner of Rathdowne and Grattan Streets, Carlton. The marriage notice in *The Argus* noted 'Both late AIF'. Isabel lived to be 68, dying in 1953.

Membership fees for 2026 are now due

Help finance the preservation of Carlton's history by becoming a financial member of the Carlton Community History Group. The membership fee is \$20 per person for a calendar year, and can be paid by cheque, or bank transfer:

BSB: 06 3014 Account number: 10198637
Name of account: Carlton Community History Group

The Last Butcher Shop in Lygon Street

In December 2025, Leo Donati announced his intention to retire and sell his long-established, and much loved, business Donati's Fine Meats in Lygon Street, Carlton. Leo began his working life as a butcher in 1965 and went on to establish his own business at 402 Lygon Street. His son Marcello later joined the business and they have worked together for the past 26 years. Sixty years in the business is an impressive record. Leo Donati is the last of a long line of butchers who have operated from the same location in Lygon Street since 1880. While other butchers have come and gone, Donati's remains the last traditional butcher's shop operating in the entire length of Lygon Street, Carlton and North Carlton. And the good news is that the business has been acquired by Jamie Valmorbida, part of the family who own King & Godfree and other businesses in Carlton. Valmorbida plans to continue, and build on, Leo Donati's legacy. CCHG wishes Leo Donati all the best for his retirement.



Leo Donati in his shop.
(Photo: Sebastian Costanzo)

This publication, **Carlton Chronicles**, is produced and distributed four times a year. If you would like to be put on the mailing list, email the **Carlton Community History Group** at cchg@y7mail.com or visit our website www.cchg.asn.au