

Fun and Games at Lincoln Square

Early in 2016 there was controversy over youngsters skateboarding in Lincoln Square and a major reconstruction is now under way. We can be grateful that this square is still in existence. Together with Argyle Square it was reserved as public space in 1853 but it appears that nothing was done with the site; as early as 1858 forty residents signed a petition to Council to stop the depositing of *"filth and rubbish"* there. Later that year it was proposed that Pelham Street be extended to run through Argyle and Lincoln Squares which would have effectively destroyed them. Opposition was strong. At a rowdy public meeting of Smith Ward residents, tempers ran high and according to one protester *"a Government should be turned out of office when they trampled on the rights of the people."* The objectors prevailed and in 1860 Council agreed to a ratepayers' petition for Lincoln Square to be ploughed and sown with grass seed, towards the cost of which the petitioners offered to contribute a total of £10. The square was fenced and over the years various improvements were made.^{1 2 3 4}

But that part of Carlton was densely populated and there was resentment that this valuable "public" space was not available for general use. In 1906 an irate resident wrote to the editor of *The Age* protesting against the *"scandalous"* lack of public access to the square. *"It is reserved in the interests of a cow keeper, who may be observed almost daily cutting grass for his cattle. Year after year the same thing goes on, one crop of grass is removed and the gates are locked so that another may grow, and so on."* Meanwhile, he said, more than 350 children living nearby were forced to play in the streets. At the Fifth Annual Congress of the National Council of Women one speaker complained that Lincoln Square *"occupied three and a half acres right in the centre of Carlton and not a soul is allowed to make use of it."*^{5 6}

These voices were heard and in 1907 Lincoln Square was in the headlines as the site of the first children's playground to be constructed anywhere in Victoria. (Sydney had one first.) A large and enthusiastic crowd including hundreds of children saw the Premier, Thomas Bent, officially open the playground just before Christmas 1907. According to *the Age*, *"Many of the children took very little interest in the formal proceedings but made full use of the swings, maypoles and seesaws and very few of those present could hear the speeches owing to the noise."* Photographs of the event published in *The Weekly Times* show a sea of hats, worn by both men and women, of course, but also by many of the children. In the background we can glimpse the houses which then surrounded the square. It was almost entirely residential with just a few corner shops and a couple of hotels.^{7 8}

The playground was to be open from 10 in the morning until sunset (closed on Sundays, of course), no person over the age of 12 was to use the "appliances" (seesaws, two maypoles and four swings) and neither football nor cricket was allowed. But rules are made to be broken. In

¹ *The Age*, 1 June 1858, p. 5

² *The Argus*, 8 October 1858, p. 6

³ *The Age*, 28 January 1859, p. 5

⁴ *The Argus*, 23 October 1860, p. 6

⁵ *The Age*, 27 November 1906, p. 6

⁶ *The Ballarat Star*, 11 October 1907, p. 3

⁷ *The Age*, 18 December 1907, p. 9

⁸ *The Weekly Times*, 28 December 1907, p. 26

October 1912 *The Argus* reported that six youths had been fined 20 shillings each for playing football in Lincoln Square on a Sunday. Two-up was a popular form of gambling. Soon after the playground was opened, *The Age*, under the headline *Two-up Sunday Schools*, reported a court case. "Constable Beyens stated that at 2.45 p.m. on 12 July he came across about 50 men and youths playing the game in Lincoln Square. When the witness got within 20 yards of the crowd someone called out 'Yow' and there was a general scamper. Mr Sanders JP: "What is the meaning of 'Yow'?" "It means here comes a policeman." (Laughter)^{9 10}

There was good reason to restrict the use of the playground to children. Over the years Lincoln Square had been the scene of many incidents involving "pushes", the term used before the Second World War for gangs of young men, larrikins, roaming the inner suburbs and very willing to fight the police or a rival group. There were such incidents in Lincoln Square as early as 1874. In the year after the playground was opened about a dozen members of the Lincoln Square "push" were involved in a disturbance in a fish shop in Madeline (now Swanston) Street where there was "a scene of indescribable confusion in which the shopkeeper was using billets of wood with good effect." When a constable arrived and used his baton, the shop was soon cleared with two arrests made. Three more followed when the incident later spilled over into the square itself.^{11 12}

In 1910 *The Ballarat Star* under the headline *Battle of the "pushes"* described an assembly in Queensberry Street of about one hundred men, some armed with pickets torn from fences in Lincoln Square, some with handkerchiefs with stones in them. They called out "Death to the governments" and moved off to the city where they caused a disturbance by shouting. The constable giving evidence in court had "never seen such an exhibition of blackguardism." In the same year two constables and a fireman succeeded in arresting a man despite his seeking help from about 40 members of the Emu "push" (presumably named for the Emu Hotel on the corner of Pelham and Bouverie Streets) who were nearby. Three years later the same "push" was mentioned in court when a constable was accused of perjury in connection with an arrest he had previously made in Lincoln Square. It was suggested that the Emu "push" was behind the prosecution and was financing it.^{13 14 15}

In 1918 Lincoln Square was again in the news when a woman called Roma Smith was murdered in Cumberland Place, an alley running south from the square. The newspapers had a field day. Decades later, in 1949, celebrated crime reporter Hugh Buggy wrote a lengthy and highly-coloured feature article for *The Argus* retelling the events of this still-unsolved crime which had occurred in what was a "squalid blind alley by day and a sinister black cleft by night. It plunged south from the green oasis of Lincoln Square..." A witness who had peered through the window had seen "by flickering candlelight a man in dark clothes" but he was never identified as the witness did not see his face.¹⁶

⁹ *The Argus*, 26 October 1912, p 20

¹⁰ *The Age*, 25 July 1908, p.16

¹¹ *The Argus*, 7 March 1874, p. 9

¹² *The Age*, 23 November 1908, p.7

¹³ *The Ballarat Star*, 14 March 1910, p. 4

¹⁴ *The Argus*, 13 April 1910, p. 10

¹⁵ *The Age*, 22 January 1913, p.11

¹⁶ *The Argus*, 29 October 1949, p. 28

Residents had been outraged in 1858 by the proposal to extend Pelham Street across Lincoln Square. Seventy years later the ire of locals was again aroused when it was proposed that “mugs alley”, the designated area set aside for motorists’ driving tests, be moved from Wellington Parade South to Lincoln Square. One councillor remarked that someone “*would put a bomb under the Town Hall if it went ahead.*” Again their protests were successful. The Town Hall was saved and Lincoln Square was left to evolve.¹⁷

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¹⁷ *The Argus*, 23 December 1938, p.8