

# Footscray Historical Society Inc.



*Ercildoune – 1909 with staff of the National Bank of Australasia*



mortgage. Much of the restoration work was done by volunteers but grants from the early Historic Building Council, and later Heritage Victoria, assisted. By 2000, Ercildoune was debt free and its roof and chimneys repaired, exterior render restored and woodwork repainted. The interior had also been refurbished. In 2002 a cottage garden was planned and developed by the volunteer efforts of members.

The early committee was active in working to achieve the aim of the society. A series of administrators appointed by the committee included George Seelaf, who brought enthusiasm and energy to the task. George was well known locally for his community work and enlisted many others in the work of collecting memorabilia and particularly in developing the collection of old and contemporary photographs of the city and its people. He was also active in organizing tours designed to develop an interest in the history of the local area. Dr John Lack, an active member of the society, brought his University of Melbourne students to Footscray to work on the City's archives, held at the Town Hall. As a result many of those records were transferred subsequently to the care of the society. These have proved to be a major resource for researchers. The publication of his *History of Footscray* in 1991 also encouraged an interest in local history in the community.

Looking to the future, along with the challenge of interpreting the past to a new generation there is the need to maintain Ercildoune and its garden and to care for the Society's growing collection. The society owns the building but there are hefty expenses such as land tax, rates and insurance associated with it each year. Leasing the upper floor and, for a time, part of the ground floor, has helped with the expense of maintaining the building. Other sources of income are book sales—the society has published a number of books—research fees, and membership fees.

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In the 1920 Annual Report of the Footscray City Council, the mayor noted that after a hurried reading of council records, he considered that 'the formation of a Historical Records Society should be commended to civic-minded citizens.'

On 17 October 1968 at a public meeting at the Footscray Town Hall, it was agreed that a society should be established to counter the threats to buildings deemed to be important to the heritage of the city. The City of Footscray Historical Society was duly constituted and when amalgamation created the City of Maribyrnong this became the Footscray Historical Society. The society embraces in its brief all the suburbs of Maribyrnong – Footscray, Yarraville, Seddon Kingsville, Maidstone, Braybrook and Maribyrnong. It continues to aim to record and preserve the history of the district.

In 1968 the Town Clerk of Footscray, E. J. Smith and the City Solicitor, Ian Secomb had been the first to recognize the need for the society, and they gathered like-minded people from the business community of Footscray to discuss the matter. There were buildings which were considered particularly at risk – Henderson House, The Ship Inn, Govan's Place and Ercildoune. Henderson House was saved and is now the Footscray Community Arts Centre. The Ship Inn was eventually lost despite attempts to save it and even suggestions to

dismantle and rebuild it. Govan's Place, an 1870s bluestone and brick dwelling, was saved by a consortium, that included Secomb, which purchased and restored it to its original function. Ercildoune was saved by the society purchasing it and developing it as its headquarters. This was achieved with the support of seven local men who contributed and acted as guarantors for the necessary mortgage from NAB.

The building was erected by the National Bank of Australasia on the corner of Napier and Hyde Streets, the first substantial bank building in the growing and prosperous township. It was designed by Terry & Oakden, built by local builders, Goss & Hopkins, and opened in 1876. As was usual, it was designed with a banking chamber, manager's office, vault and a spacious residence for the manager. The commercial centre of Footscray later moved to the west and the bank, which had amalgamated with the Colonial Bank, moved its business to Barkly Street, keeping the Napier Street building as the manager's residence. In 1942 the building was sold and for many years functioned as a rooming house among other uses. When purchased by the society in 1969 it had somehow acquired the name Ercildoune and was somewhat dilapidated.

The restoration of the building and the development of the society proceeded over the years. Subscription dinners and other fund-raising events eventually paid off the