

History of Altona (Laverton) Homestead

often referred to as Laverton Estate

Alfred Langhorne was responsible for building Altona Homestead in the early 1840s, the first pastoral property on the foreshore of Port Phillip. In its early years it was known as Laverton Homestead or Estate, or just simply as Laverton, and was named such by Alfred after the property of a much favoured grandmother in England. It was renamed Altona Homestead in the late 1880s to avoid confusion with the newly developing nearby township of Laverton. References to Laverton in newspapers, government gazettes and legal documents before about 1888 were referring to the Alfred Langhorne pastoral run, of which Altona Homestead and a few trees are now all that remain of that grand property.

Alfred was one of 15 children born to Henry and Mary Ann Langhorne living in Camberwell, a suburb of London, in the early 1800s. Alfred's father was an insurance broker and his older brother William was registered on the London Stock Exchange. Alfred worked for his brother as a clerk. However, the adventures of other older brothers in Australia continually enticed him until he eventually convinced his father to allow him to travel to the colony too.

In April 1835 aged just 17 Alfred arrived in Port Jackson, New South Wales and spent the next 15 months working with his brother Charles on the Milbro Dale, NSW property learning the skills of a stockman. Sale of the property after the death of its owner signalled the time for the two brothers to move on.

Alfred was meeting up with others who were familiar with driving stock across the country and in June 1837 he overlanded his first herd of cattle from Albury to Dandenong, the beginning of his cattle drives from NSW to Dandenong and Adelaide.

In 1836 Alfred began acquiring land in what is now the Altona area of Victoria. By the early 1840s he was constructing buildings typical for a pastoral run with materials brought in from Tasmania, while he also continued on with cattle drives.

It was on one such drive to Adelaide that he met the young, beautiful and available Sarah Marianne August. They married in Adelaide in 1841 where Sarah had her mother and siblings, so they weren't in a hurry to leave. It was during this time Alfred learnt of a suspected problem his brother Charles and brother-in-law, Robert Maskall August, may be having with local Aborigines in the Rufus River area where they were driving cattle. Alfred along with several others persuaded Governor Grey to send a posse of 28 police and civilians including Alfred, to go and rescue the drive, leaving young bride Sarah in Adelaide. The Rufus River Massacre is a notorious bit of Australian colonial history brought about by the clash between two cultures. Alfred rescued his two relatives and they returned safely to Adelaide.

Sarah and Alfred along with the two rescued brothers, plus Sarah's maid, boarded a steamer to travel to Melbourne in August 1841. Early October Alfred and Sarah set up home in Exhibition Street, Melbourne, while Alfred established an office in Bourke Street for his merchant business importing flour. They had moved permanently into Laverton Homestead by early 1843 where sadly their seven month old son, Henry August Langhorne, died in May.

In January 1844, Sarah's mother, Sarah August, was living with them when she died in Laverton. Later followed the death of Sarah's brother, Robert Maskall August, in July 1845, aged only 22, also at Laverton, after taking ill only a couple of hours earlier. Robert was overseer of Laverton at the time, then Alfred's brother Charles Langhorne took over and lived with Alfred and Sarah.

Alfred and Sarah were able to have another two children, Alfred Robert Maskall Langhorne in 1845 named in honour of Sarah's recently deceased brother, and Alice Mary Anne Langhorne in 1848, both thriving while they continued to live on Laverton Estate. The pastoral run grew crops to

sustain the household and its animals, including sheep shipped monthly to Launceston, Tasmania. It also supplied timbers to the burgeoning factories lining the Maribyrnong River, providing the energy source to power their operations.

On 6 Feb 1851 Victoria suffered its first major recorded bushfire called Black Thursday. It's always the first one on top of the list of major bushfires in Victoria. Alfred and Sarah were due to embark on a business trip to Launceston later that same day, and it wasn't until they were on board the steamer out in Bass Strait when looking back at all the black smoke that they were able to appreciate the extent of the fires. During that trip Alfred organised a supply of bluestone to be shipped to Victoria so he could rebuild the wooden structures of their homestead and outbuildings in a material that would have better hope of withstanding such an inferno should it ever happen again.

In 1852 Alfred and Sarah decided they would take their children back to the homeland for their education. The property was leased to Frederick Armand Powlett in December the same year for the annual sum of 900 pounds for three years, including 2,286 acres, all the buildings and 6,000 sheep. Frederick was Victoria's provisional colonial treasurer, the second person to hold the position since Victoria became a state in its own right on 1 July 1851. We're not sure how long Frederick Powlett remained at Laverton Homestead after the sad death there of his wife Margaret on 7 March 1853. Margaret died of fever, so it is very possible she succumbed to the measles epidemic that was sweeping Melbourne in 1853-4 killing many.

Sarah Langhorne and son Robert, plus assumedly the rather young daughter Alice, left Australia in January 1853 to enrol Robert in the prestigious English Rugby School. Alfred followed them in September after finalising a number of land transactions.

While still in England in 1859 Alfred had tried to sell Laverton Estate but after some legal wrangling due to the buyers not paying up, Alfred was able to regain possession.

In December 1862 Laverton Estate was leased to John Carfrae for the yearly payment of 500 pounds for five years. Carfrae had recently retired from his Horsham pastoral station and used Laverton for his stock. He did not live there but Thomas Carfrae and H Barker may have lived in the homestead as they were occupiers of the 60 acre portion deemed to be a farm. The property included another 2,500 acres recorded as pasture.

After spending 13 years in England and Scotland, Alfred returned to Melbourne in August 1867. He found the Laverton Estate to be in a run down condition and his priority was to find a competent, honest man to rehabilitate it. He engaged his nephew Joseph William Cooke Langhorne who had 10 years experience as an overseer on the Broadford property at Sunday Creek.

Sarah returned to Melbourne in July 1868 along with two nieces, leaving son Robert at Rugby School to complete his education. Sadly daughter Alice had died in England in 1861 from diphtheria aged only 13.

Sarah and Alfred were once again living at Laverton Estate although Alfred curtailed his obligations to the land by leasing 2,500 acres to the Victorian Meat Preservation Co. In October 1871 one of their drovers was working on Laverton with his 10 year old son, Henry Britt. He sent young Henry to the next paddock to retrieve a horse when a catastrophic accident befell the youngster in an entanglement with the horse causing his sad early death. The father heard the cries for help and after rushing to the scene tried in vain to save his young son's life.

Earlier in June 1871 another tragedy struck the Langhornes when Sarah died of Parkinson disease in the homestead. Then in February 1874 with his own health failing, Alfred sold Laverton

estate to the Phelps brothers while he went to live in a private hotel in St Kilda. Alfred signed his will in June before passing away in August from disease of the heart and diarrhea.

Some months previous son Robert still in England had received news his father was not well and boarded a ship for the trip to Melbourne. Regrettably, he didn't arrive in time to see his father again. After tidying up some of his father's affairs, Robert decided there was no longer any close connection for him with Australia so he returned to England where he married and raised a family. It was Robert's descendants who eventually migrated to Canada.

John Lecky Phelps together with his brother Joseph James Phelps purchased Laverton Estate from Alfred Langhorne in February 1874.

May 1874 Isaac Hawker was advertising his willingness to graze horses and cattle on the Laverton Estate for a minimum of three months, in his position as overseer in charge. He was also wanting to purchase 40-50 young cattle, weaners, milkers and calves.

When Hawker died in 1921, a short obituary appeared in the Williamstown Chronicle giving prominence to him being "remembered as the ranger of Altona Homestead 30 years ago. His house was the only building on the estate, and was used on many occasions by the Methodist denomination for church services there. In latter years he resided in Williamstown and died at Princes Street on Friday last, leaving a widow and grown up family." Although we cannot be certain this is a reference to the actual homestead as there is evidence of Hawker living in another building on the estate.

By September 1874, William McPherson had been appointed the resident overseer where he remained for the next 12 years. End of the same year John Lecky Phelps had returned to his home country Ireland, never to return to Australia again and dying in May 1881 in Florence, Italy. Following the death of his brother, Joseph James Phelps was able to purchase his deceased brother's portion of Laverton Estate to become the sole owner in 1884.

In 1888 Altona Bay Estate Co Ltd purchased at least part of Laverton estate, subdividing land surrounding the homestead into residential blocks.

At the same time Staples, Wise & Co had another nearby residential subdivision under way on land purchased from the Chirnsides, which they named Laverton. This soon became confusing with Laverton Estate, so the latter became Altona Homestead instead, adopting the name that had been used by Robert Wrede for his property a little further east. The same locality name also used by the developers to promote their land sales for the residential blocks in 1888.

A small parcel of land surrounding Altona Homestead and its outbuildings was retained as one property which the Trust and Agency Co of Australia Ltd purchased in 1896. In 1903 Melbourne solicitor, William Henry Croker, bought the property, extensively renovating the homestead by joining the separate wings into one building, creating a new front entrance, adding bay windows and stucco work to the front, and the modern innovation of an internal bathroom.

In 1915 Altona Homestead was bought by Altona Beach Estates Ltd who employed Walter Henry Howe as manager and he lived with his wife Hannah Maud Howe in the homestead. They were there in 1917 and 1918 when they provided valuable assistance to some of the earliest scout camps in Altona, taking over the homestead grounds. They continued to live at the homestead until about 1924.

In 1920 the property was purchased by Footscray company Cuming Smith & Co Pty Ltd (later Commonwealth Fertilisers) for use as a holiday seaside resort for their employees, installing trams in the front garden for sleeping accommodation while adapting the homestead to provide kitchen

and bathroom facilities. The Meddings family lived in the homestead as caretakers. This period also covered the depression years when another branch of the Meddings family were struggling to repay their mortgage in the Newport area, so they rented out their home and moved into the homestead as well.

In 1937 the Shire of Werribee bought Altona Homestead, leasing it out to the local Twentymans family as a private residence, until council came up with the new idea of using part of it as a baby health centre. A service desperately needed in the developing Altona suburb by young mothers to save them the inconvenience of travel and time spent to access the nearest centre in Newport, exacerbated by the inconvenient train time table. Although this was the only council owned building in town, the Twentymans were not keen. The issue developed into a full blown stoush between locals and council with the locals determined to prevent council from evicting the Twentymans, a proposal it does not seem council was ever considering.

During WWII some rooms of the homestead were used as the local Air Raid Precautions (ARP) headquarters and the bluestone walls were sand bagged to provide extra protection.

It was a celebrated milestone in 1957 when Altona finally managed to secede from the Shire of Werribee to become a shire in its own right. Ownership of the Altona Homestead was transferred to the new council to become their first council building, although not the first public building. The Altona Progress Association hall built in 1917 around the corner in Sargood Street had the right to claim that title.

The homestead served as council offices until completion of the purpose built civic offices in Civic Parade were opened in 1963. Then the homestead became a venue for local groups such as the camera club, local Labour party, children's dentist and the historical society. Outbuildings of the homestead which housed the stables, cool store and butchery to name a few, some of which were used as early shops in Altona, were eventually demolished to make way for the community necessities of a senior citizens centre and public library, before the significance of these buildings was realised.

We were most fortunate to still have the original homestead, despite numerous internal modifications during the 1900s adapting it to the current needs of the day. In 1987-9 it underwent a major restoration under the guidance of architectural historian, David Bick. It was a joint project between council and Altona Laverton Historical Society with the end result still being as it stands today in a very pleasant public park (Logan Reserve), across the road from the popular Altona swimming beach, currently owned by the community and opened to the public by the historical society with exhibitions and Devonshire teas.

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