

MELBOURNE HISTORICAL RESEARCH GROUP

www.mhrg.org.uk

2012 EXHIBITION

SHOPS AND SHOPPING IN MELBOURNE

Our annual exhibition this year takes place in the Leisure Centre (now a.k.a. Melbourne Assembly Rooms) on Saturday 16th and Sunday 17th June, from 11.30am to 5pm both days. Admission is free and all are warmly invited to come along. Limited light refreshments will be available, along with a chance to browse informally through part of the Group's reference collection.

Our exhibition this year is of "Shops and Shopping". We do not pretend that our coverage of the subject is anything approaching comprehensive; it is merely a miscellaneous collection of items brought together under a common heading. But we hope nevertheless that our visitors will find something of interest in it. The material is diverse, ranging from 19th century bill headings from the Harpur Crewe and Melbourne Estates, to actual obsolete Victorian and Edwardian stock unearthed in the back of Thompson's drapery in the Market Place when it closed in the 1950s, and donated by Mrs. Beryl Bentley. A survey of Melbourne shops in 1966, and photographs taken as recently as the 1970s, are already historic as records of shops long gone.

Some interesting tales attach to particular shops. One curious episode concerns an isolated butcher's shop which stood in the middle of the street somewhere near the south end of Castle Street, acquired and pulled down by Mathew Lamb of Melbourne Hall in the mid 18th century, because he was tired of it being in the way. Another interesting story concerns John Earp's shop front of the 1860s, still to be seen in the cruck cottage on High Street. Earp had pleaded with the Melbourne Estate for some time to have a shop window inserted in his tailor's shop in lieu of the ordinary house window, the reason being that people were increasingly resorting to ready-made goods displayed in windows, instead of going into a private workshop to be measured up. Earp therefore wanted a proper shop window to avoid being left behind. The three letters that Earp wrote on the subject are at once instructive, poignant and hilarious.

Shop windows would be virtually non-existent in Melbourne before the 19th century, as sleepy agricultural Melbourne was slow to adopt the urban trend for window shopping, and a 'shop' generally meant a workshop. A shop was originally a shed housing a trade, and has the same root as the word "shippen" denoting a cow barn or cattle shelter. The internet suggests that the verb "to shop", i.e. to visit shops, is first encountered in 1764.

Some of Melbourne's earliest shopfronts simply comprised door and window frames adjacent to each other underneath a wide and shallow brick arch, and a few examples of this primitive arrangement are still to be seen in Melbourne, such as at No. 14 Chambers Row (c1800) which was formerly a butcher's shop. By the mid 19th century, buildings were being constructed to house shops from the start, with proper shopfronts framed by timber pilasters and cornices. The original building plans still survive of some, including the house and chemist's shop on Potter Street built for Francis Ison in 1885, and the house and shop at the bottom of Blanch Croft built for Mr. Adcock the baker in 1887. Several of our existing shopfronts are replacements of earlier 19th century ones which had smaller panes of glass.

Being Jubilee year, the Group will also take the opportunity to exhibit some of the many photographs taken by Hugh Andrews in 1977, recently donated to the Group (in 35mm slide form) by Mr. Andrews' niece Judith Lakin. Their interest is more nostalgic than historic, but that does not diminish their value. Most are of the Silver Jubilee celebrations, but there is an interesting set taken of the inside and outside of the Leisure Centre during its last day as a functioning secondary school in July 1977.

Now that the Historical Research Group is twelve years old, it has built up a good body of exhibition material which we would like to make more accessible to the public. This was one of our key aims from the beginning, but is yet to be fully realised. We are investigating ways in which this might be done more effectively as part of a series of suggested alterations to the Leisure Centre building, but these ideas are at a very early stage and it would be premature to enlarge on them. On a related point, group member Barry Thomas has completed the listing and boxing of the Parish Council archive, but a suitable permanent home for the archive has yet to be found. The Civic Society's important archive may also soon be homeless, and the hope is that the archives of the three organisations can be accommodated, at least in part, in a suitable new facility.

Philip Heath, Chairman