

Moving into Clifton Hill in 1973 – a memoir

Janet Taylor

We moved into Roseneath St, Clifton Hill in September 1973 as a young couple in our late 20s, excited to be taking possession of a house we had actually bought, a house which has now been our home for over 50 years.

The house

Our house was single-storey, double-fronted block-fronted weatherboard, built in 1901 – ‘Federation’ style. It had a mix of ‘original features’, prized by estate agents at some times, so high ceilings with elaborate ceiling roses and cornices in the front rooms, fireplaces with carved wooden mantles and small fire grates suitable for coal fires, original doors and windows. The ceiling roses and high air vents in the walls would have been to cater for earlier gas lighting which had long been replaced by electric light. Originally there would have been ruby red or blue glass panels on either side of the front door but these were now pastel patterned glass, which in time we replaced again.

The house also showed signs of its most recent owners, a family from former Yugoslavia who had arrived in the 1950s. They had laid sheets of vinyl over the somewhat sloping Baltic pine floors. We chose where to put the bed head by seeing where a golf ball rolled on the bedroom floor. The Yugoslavs had ‘candled’ the ceiling of one of the front rooms, a decorative effect of patterning using candle smoke. The outside of the house was painted blue, not the heritage colours that would come to be expected, but removing layers of paint showed a couple of earlier versions of cream coloured paint. At some stage the original bull-nosed front verandah had been replaced with corrugated fibre glass and the front decking with concrete. But the three front steps remained heavy local bluestone. The corrugated iron roof leaked somewhat and we placed buckets along the front hallway.

There had been various changes to the back of the house. The vestibule was walled with lining boards and the kitchen walls were a mix of boards and Masonite. It seemed the house had been divided to be used by a couple of separate families.

The kitchen had an old gas Early Kooka stove situated in the fireplace. This was useful for heating water as there was no running hot water, but there was an explosive gas heater above the bath for hot water there. The toilet was not situated on the back lane as it would have been if the house was older, but was in a shed immediately outside the back door, a toilet with a wooden seat and a round bowl fitted into a wooden bench, with a pull chain to the high cistern tank above it.

A ‘sunroom’ had been added across the back of the house at some stage, with a high timber lined ceiling, assorted re-used windows and a concrete floor laid directly on the slope of Clifton Hill. There was a gully trap in this room, that would have been outside originally, and a gas copper with concrete wash tubs in what would have been an old wash house and had

been incorporated into this larger room. The original old wooden wash tubs were still in the back garden, where they remained for many years and were joined by the copper and concrete tubs when we upgraded from the copper to a washing machine. The latter was a gift from my mother when we were expecting our first child.

When I visited the Town Hall to enrol to vote I was met by the Rate Collector, Albie Pannam, who was pleased to be able to tell me he used to live in what was now our house. Albie was a former Collingwood football player and was also the uncle of [Lou Richards](#), another Collingwood footballer, who had become by then a well-known football commentator.

Albie remembered the house particularly for its cellar, which we then looked for. We found a trap door, under the vinyl in the corner of the living room, which opened out into the remains of a cellar underneath of the house. In future years when I went to pay the rates Albie would again see the address and mention the cellar. I often wondered what was hidden there that was so special.

The front garden proudly sported two cypresses, one on either side of the front steps, and these, we were told, represented Peace and Prosperity. These labels made them more difficult to decide to remove, which was necessary as they grew larger. The front garden also had an attractive fuchsia bush, which is now the only remaining plant of the front garden as we first knew it.



Roseneath Street 1974: Our house with Peace and Prosperity by the front steps and the new street tree

The back garden had been productive and had been used to grow onions and garlic. Above the remains of these crops stood a substantial Hills Hoist. There were also lavender bushes and a couple of roses. The only two plants that remain from that era are a large and still flourishing loquat tree and a grapevine, the latter now on its last legs.

At the back of the garden was a corrugated iron and weatherboard garage and workshop with a very heavy sliding door opening onto the bluestone back lane. I sometimes tried to drive my VW sedan into the garage but there was a very unforgiving brick wall on the far side to the lane. It was all rather difficult. In the back shed the previous owners had left behind some shoe lasts, wooden and metal, and a couple of 1950s family wedding photos. There was also a substantial work bench, possibly a cobblers' bench made from large planks that originally must have been part of an industrial barrel as the marks of the metal bands remained.

At the time I wrote a poem of sorts about our new abode:

First two weeks

*The silvery trails of snails
On struggling seedlings and old bluestone
Old bones of unloved cats
And curls of brown onion shells
Western sun through the loquat tree
And snatches of song from Lebanon
Drips splash on hallway floor.*

*Will we summon Vic-for-leaky-roofs
Or Rheem for the hottest water ever seen?*

The street

Roseneath Street was a mix of Victorian and Edwardian houses, most single-storey but for the two sets of four double-storey terraces. In 1973 there were perhaps three shops of which now only the milk bar remains. There were functioning factories in Roseneath Street then. The Chien Wah dim sim factory on the Hoddle Street corner is the only one that still produces. There was a small engineering works and the Modern Tone furniture factory, with its brutalist façade. Round the corner in Groom St, the National Can Company's machines noisily cut out tin shapes in the old brick buildings that had originated as boot factories. One street down, in Noone Street, the Synthetic Dye Works filled other old boot factories, on either side of the road, with rolls of cloth which would be transported by forklifts from one side of the road to the other for processing. Many neighbours complained of the smelly fumes from the dyeworks' chimneys, but they seldom blew our way.

At the northern Hoddle St corner of Roseneath Street was the De Mar timber yard, which remains as Del Mar but which no longer sells second-hand building material as it did then. At the east end of Roseneath St on the north side was the SEC switch yard and a very old little timber house, since demolished, on land that had belonged to Melbourne founder, John Pascoe Fawkner. On the south side of the street was the Collingwood Council yard, but in a simpler form than now. It was the home of the Council's horse which pulled a cart around the streets to collect rubbish and could fit neatly down the back lanes in a way later huge garbage trucks could not. The footbridge was there across the Merri Creek at the very end of the

street, but the creek banks were weedy and bare of trees, compared to the current bush-like vegetation, planted and tended since.



The Roseneath St footbridge across the Merri Creek 1977

Our neighbours? On our block of seven houses, between Gordon and Myrtle Streets, there were two Greek families, two Lebanese families, an old long-time Australian couple and a new young English couple with children. Our next-door neighbours on one side were Greek, and on the other side, in the two-storey terrace, were Lebanese, a couple with four children and an uncle. I recall the Lebanese family in the far terrace house had seven children. After our Lebanese neighbours moved out, over the years the next-door terrace was owned by a series of young Australian couples, often doctors, who, by the time they had their second child, found the house much too small for them and moved elsewhere. The Greek family on the far corner ran the milk bar across the street. We heard Greek spoken daily, and often shouted. Over the fence our Greek neighbours grew a splendid fig tree from which we could harvest. Our Greek neighbours valued the leaves from our grape vine and we learned from them to stuff the young grape leaves to cook as dolmades. The Greeks next door at one stage had bantam chooks, with a noisy little rooster. Once they brought home a lamb, or was it a goat? to slaughter. We also learned the pleasure of dyeing eggs with brilliant red dye for Greek Orthodox Easter. The next-door Lebanese family kept ducks and pigeons in their back yard. We enjoyed the ducks' quiet quacking and could throw our unwanted snails over the fence to feed them. I remember their little boy, frustrated at one of his pigeons, abusing it as 'You wog pigeon!'. I fear 'wog' was a familiar term of schoolyard abuse.

Having grown up in a residential suburb, I was delighted with the variety of factories, shops and houses and the diverse ethnic cultures. For open space we had the gracious Darling Gardens at one end of the street and the vast Yarra Bend Park at the other.

In the 1970s traffic and parking were not the local problems they became. Few of our immediate neighbours had cars and parking in Roseneath St was only difficulty on Saturdays when the Collingwood football team was playing at home at Victoria Park. Then, if we went out to do Saturday morning shopping (shops were often not open Saturday afternoon or Sunday), we would have to park some streets away and carry our spoils home as the footy crowds' cars filled the streets. From our front door we could see the club magpie on the Victoria Park buildings. Collingwood Football Club still trained and played at their own traditional ground. Black and white colours were everywhere, proudly sported on Collingwood Council property. At that stage, before the Eastern Freeway opened, it was still an easy walk to the sacred footy ground.

It was a time when the virtue of planting 'native' Australian plants was being promoted and the Collingwood Council was starting to plant little street trees in Roseneath Street, a mix of Australian melaleuca amaryllis and Kanooka (water gums), but interspersed with deciduous prunus trees.

Occasionally in the street we would be drawn outside by the sound of the Salvation Army marching brass band, all in uniform. Another street sound was the blaring of 'musical' horns as some of the local young men drove around showing off their cars.

Clifton Hill in 1973

From our arrival in 1973 we often shopped very locally. There was the Greek milk bar across the road. There was a little cluster of shops up the hill in Ramsden Street – Marshall's butcher, a short-lived greengrocer, a milk bar and grocer. Then in Spensley Street near the station, there was the police station, the barber, and the Royal Hotel and across the road the newsagent, a shoe and shoe repair shop, Lucy of Rome the hairdressers and a laundromat. On the diagonally opposite corner of Spensley Street and Berry Street was Mr Norris's hardware shop while Mrs Norris ran the chemist shop next door, and next door again was Martin's butcher. Further along Spensley St was Joe's Supermarket and the other Marshall butcher on the Fenwick St corner. So we had the luxury of three butcher shops in east Clifton Hill and there were another three in Queens Parade. However one of the three in Queens Parade was firebombed one night, but we never knew why.

Many of the buildings we knew then have remained, but the St Andrew's Anglican Church which stood large at the corner of South Terrace (the continuation of Roseneath Street west of Hoddle Street) was demolished and replaced by the aged care Sambell Lodge, which was demolished in turn and replaced by school buildings. The Darling Gardens temporality housed Collingwood High School until Collingwood College buildings were completed in Cromwell Street. Also in the Darling Gardens was the Maternal and Child Health Centre which I was to later enjoy visiting with my babies.

Clifton Hill residents, when we first moved in, were a mix of the older Australians who had lived here most or all of their lives, and of post-war migrants from the Mediterranean – Greek, Italian, Yugoslav and Lebanese. There was starting to be a new demographic, sometimes labelled as the ‘trendies’. These were the young tertiary-educated of Australian Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, from the middle suburbs, choosing to live in the inner suburbs, where housing was relatively cheap and close to the facilities and entertainments of the city and Carlton. By the 1980s the label became ‘yuppies’ – young urban professionals. The migrant families could now sell their old homes for higher prices and move to newer houses in the northern suburbs with bigger back yards for vegetables, or even build their own palazzos.

Was Clifton Hill a community? I saw it rather as a place of overlapping social networks. There were the older Anglo-Australians, some born at the end of the 19th century, some had been at school together, had worked in local factories and had known each other for many decades. The different migrant groups had their own networks, for example there were Greek Saturday schools for the children, so they could speak with their grandparents. The local Lebanese families were served by a mobile van that delivered fresh food to their doors. There was the Italian cinema at St John’s Catholic Church in Queens Parade, and in Spensley Street, Joe’s Flower of Sorrento Continental Supermarket. The newly-arrived residents, young Australian professionals, some with a focus on social justice and social change, had networks which included, for some, the local ALP branch and the newly formed Collingwood Residents Association.

The era

Gough Whitlam had become the first Labor Prime Minister of Australia in a generation in December 1972. This was bringing all sorts of possibilities for social change at a local level as well as getting Australian troops out of Vietnam. What was to come over the next years included the Disadvantaged Schools Program from which our local schools benefitted, and in time the Collingwood Community Health Centre. At the state level, Rupert Hamer had replaced Henry Bolte as the Liberal Premier, and labelled Victoria as the Garden State.

In terms of local government, Clifton Hill was part of the City of Collingwood, along with the suburbs of Collingwood and Abbotsford. The grand Town Hall stood as it still does on Hoddle Street, but Hoddle Street was in the process of being widened and was a mess of demolitions and road works for a number of years. Collingwood Council had long been the bastion of the Labor Party. For many years there had been no local elections as the candidates were all preselected by the ALP and no one stood against them. As an engaged new resident I went down to the Town Hall to enrol to vote in the local elections and I believe I was laughed at as such elections did not happen. But there were changes afoot and a group of young socially progressive candidates within the ALP followed the Reverend [Andrew McCutcheon](#) into the Council with the aim of urban renewal and services for migrants.

Freeways

What actually consumed much local activism was the question of the Eastern Freeway known as the F19. When we moved in in 1973 the Eastern Freeway was still under construction. Its wide path had been cut through Yarra Bend Park, and the confluence of Merri Creek and the Yarra had been remodelled. What was underway was the deep blasting of the basalt rock beneath the freeway which was intended to allow the mainline train from Doncaster, proposed to run down the middle strip of the freeway, to join the main line near Victoria Park station. We would hear the warning siren that blasting was about to occur, and the next time we looked at the plaster walls in our hallway and bedrooms new cracks appeared in the ageing lath and plaster. These were mostly hairline cracks, but very noticeable. In time we joined with others in a small class action for compensation and learned that in Abbotsford houses quite dramatic cracks opened up in their brick walls. Some years later we received a little compensation, and we heard that, because of the unexpected deep basalt, the blasters had used much more explosive than permitted. What happened to the deep cutting they blasted? It was filled in and the much hoped for Doncaster train line was never built.

Stopping the Eastern Freeway/F19 developed into a major protest movement. The Collingwood Residents Association had formed in 1972 as a pressure group and worked with the Council to fight the F19 and on a range of other issues. I soon started attending meetings.

In the 1960s there were plans for freeways everywhere. What we did not learn until after we had signed our contract of sale to buy our house was that one of the proposed freeways, the F2, was drawn to cross Roseneath St between our house and the railway line. It would be a multilane version of the Hume highway, and we would be teetering on the brink. While fighting to stop the opening of the Eastern Freeway that had already been built, in retrospect seems unwinnable, at least the protests seemed to halt some of the other freeway plans. The F2 has still not been constructed.

Local history

Before we moved to Clifton Hill I had spent three years living and travelling in historic Europe and beyond and being fascinated by the history of these places. I had not been interested in local history while I was growing up in Melbourne, but now I was keen to explore the history of where I was living. So off I went to the Collingwood Library situated in the Town Hall and the Librarian Miss Wallace kindly showed me the history collection housed in a cupboard under the stairs. For myself I bought the recently published book by Bernard Barrett *The inner suburbs: the evolution of an industrial area*, which in much detail compared the development of the municipalities of Collingwood and Fitzroy. This was the start of a long-term interest and involvement in local history spurred on by the celebrations of the 1976 Centenary of the City of Collingwood, led by Andrew and Vivienne McCutcheon, which involved developing history walks and collecting oral histories. At that time we found the memories of the older local residents of interest (see [In Those Days](#)) and perhaps this memoir may be of future interest.