

# C H James - Father of Fairfield Park

© Paul Michell April, 2005.

## Charles Henry James (1848 - 1898): Irish Immigrant, Grocer, Land-boomer & Bankrupt

The nineteenth century was a period of boom and bust for Victoria. There were many land crashes with the development of Melbourne. When these occurred the effect was felt everywhere. The first was in 1837, just two years after the colony was founded. Land prices suddenly crashed. Sheep prices fell from 25s to 1/6 a head. There was another crash, barely six years later in 1842/3, in which William Rucker of Rucker's Hill fame fell victim. However by 1851 gold was the way of all things and it seemed memories were short. It is estimated that there were about 200,000 people in Victoria and gold worth 25 millions pound had been won. Plentiful gold helped people to get back on their feet and the feeling was that gold and its associated wealth would always be available. The good times rolled for quite awhile! Population grew astonishingly, many wanting the dream of a house of their own. And so it continued until the 1880s ....

During the 1870-1880s developers were opening up large tracts of land around Melbourne, coupled with the development of the railways. Building Societies were awash with a seemingly an unending supply of money for loans. By 1890 there was over 5 million pounds on deposit (mostly from working people and the middle-class).



[img – The Boom Resting]

There were signs in 1889 that the economy needed some time out. Here we see a Bulletin cartoon of Victoria nursing an exhausted 'Boom'.

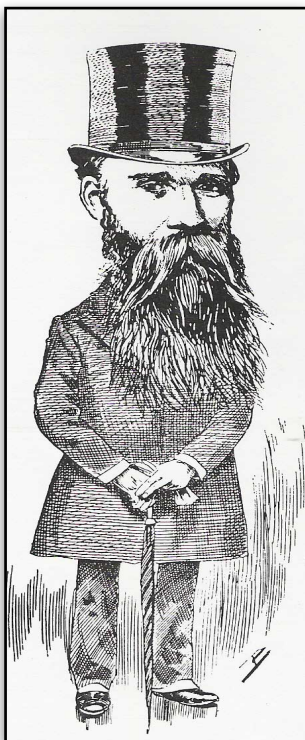
We must remember that at this time Melbourne was still a city surrounded by undeveloped land including Chinese market gardens, orchards, and grazing paddocks. Had it not been for people like Charles Henry James the Melbourne we know would have developed much slower and been a lot different. The land sales created a huge growth in the urban populations. For example between 1881 and 1891 South Melbourne almost doubled its population from 25,000 persons to over 45,000. Whilst the northern suburbs still had small populations. In Northcote (not including Alphington and Fairfield) the increase was over 400% from a paltry 1584 persons to over 6000 a decade later!



[img– The Bust]

A Bulletin cartoon from 1891 showing the failure of the State, Business & Church. With this sudden growth came the inevitable bust. Thousands of middle-class people lost their savings as banks closed, their jobs and homes. There were huge reductions in public service, cuts in salaries. Inevitably 1891 and 1898 Victoria lost over a hundred thousand people because of the uncontrolled depression, many to NSW. This was not helped by Victorian Legislation allowing companies to only go into liquidation unless the majority of shareholders agreed. In addition their books would not be publicly examined. Another piece of legislation allowed companies in debt to make secret arrangements with creditors often paying as little as 1/2 d in the pound on huge debts, even over a million pounds. Again these were not made public. As a result people had no idea which company was solvent or not! Most land boomers like James would come unstuck during this period

and the resultant loss of confidence would not be fully resolved until post WWI. It was this period that led to New South Wales increasing its population, which Victoria has never overtaken. For those who lived through this, it was considered far worse than the 1929 crash.



[img – C H James]

Charles Henry James was born in Enniscorthy, Ireland on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1848. Just two months shy of his fiftieth year he died 2<sup>nd</sup> October in 1898. He more than likely arrived in Australia around 1867 and after a brief sojourn in South Australia his name in Victoria first appears in 1873 (he was aged say 25 years) when he marries Harriet Hardy Dobson, by which he will have six children! A year later he is listed as both a grocer in Queensberry St and Lands & Survey at 25 Victoria Pde.

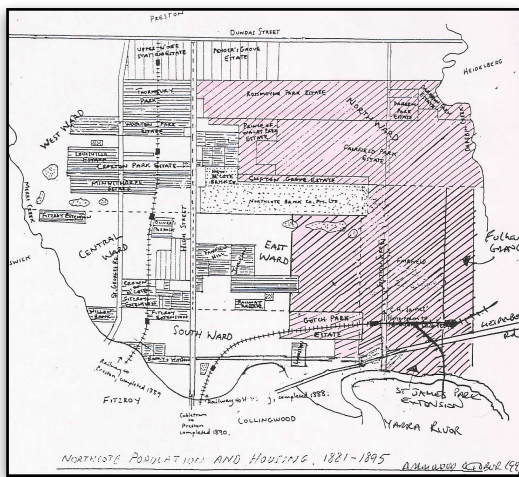
By 1876 James had teamed up with **Gooch** in Green St, Windsor. James & Gooch was a land dealing company. Not surprisingly as a number of streets in Windsor are named 'Henry', 'James' & 'Gooch'. By now his days of being a grocer are finished. By 1879 James is listed as Manager of General Credit Co at 81 Collins St. From at least 1882 James had teamed up with his brother in law Percy Dobson as Wine Merchants at 14 Market Buildings, Collins St. His residence is given as St Georges Rd., Toorak. By this time he was a Justice of the Peace. But his wealth was made elsewhere than wine.

For a long time I have puzzled why and how did C H James select the area in Darebin so successfully develop his land speculation interests? I suspect that Edmund James of High St. was his brother – a wine & spirits merchant with offices at 103 Collins St. James' being the recent immigrant would have been assisted by him. This is confirmed when he



eventually took over the city's wine & spirit interests. When visiting or living with Edmund in Northcote CH recognised the potential in the vast undeveloped region to the east. It is likely that he was introduced to Nehemiah Wimble secretary of the Lands Dept as we find Charles Henry involved with 'Lands & Survey' in 1874. Wimble is credited for developing many of the High Street buildings between Westbourne Gve and Separation St. Perhaps this was James' early teacher!

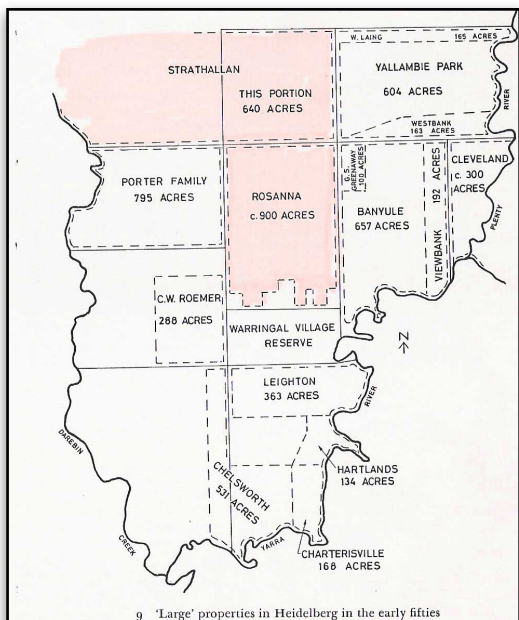
James is not an unfamiliar word around Northcote. There is a James Street and a municipal ward is named James taking in most of Fairfield and parts of Alphington. It is very fitting since at one time James would have owned most of, if not all the land within this ward. In one his Thornbury estates there is even a Gooch St!



[img - plan of Northcote showing James' land]

The reason for our interest in James can be seen here. At one stage he owned a substantial part of Northcote, Fairfield and Alphington. Here they are highlighted in pink. Some of the estates are: Fulham Grange, Many 'Park Estates' including Fairfield, St John's, St James, Prince of Wales, Gotch, Rossmoyne and Rayment.

James' active years spanned the period known as the land boom period. His early interest in Darebin included Alphington, Fairfield, Northcote, Thornbury, and South Preston around the period 1882-1886.

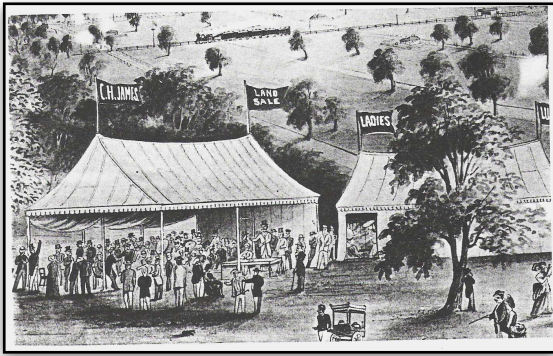


[img - Heidelberg plan]

During the late 1870s his solicitor was Henry Davies, who must have learned the land speculating business rather well from now a good practitioner such as Charles Henry. Davies would later become a land boomer and Premier in his own right. With him, James & Dobson purchased large tracts of land in Heidelberg. Estates Included 'Rosanna' and the Berlin Estate. Later purchases included Bundoora Park in the North.

The strategy of buying and selling land then was no different from today. A developer buys a large block, puts in some streets and subdivides it to small blocks for housing. Streets have to be laid down – thankfully James did not make them too narrow,

often they are quite wide. He was an astute businessman and realised that transport and publicity was the key to selling land. Charles Henry James contended that no man should live more than 5 miles from his work. In Northcote all his estates had long streets crossing at right angles with the familiar grid-pattern that is evident still today. Unfortunately he did not include recreation/ park lands on his estates.



[img – Sales tent near railway line]

James' land sales in this area began with land sales in Alphington and Fairfield by the Yarra River of 'gentlemen's estates'. Most of the choices lots were taken up in 1882,3. Heading northwards his land sales swiftly settled the area. It was the Fairfield Park sales that was one of the grandest ventures. Taking of course full advantage of the 'nowhere-to-nowhere' railway line that was established between Alphington and

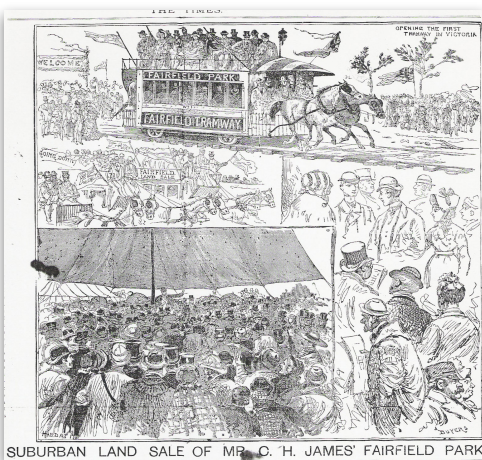
Clifton Hill - but with no ongoing connections in either direction! For the 'Leviathan Sale at Fairfield Park' in 1884 it is described by James in glowing terms that are still applicable today:



*"Already handsome houses and fashionable villas are going up and leaders of society are removing from the crowded suburbs to this health giving district. It is not 4 miles from the GPO; it has a railway station on the ground; it has the river close by for fishing and boating; and it is surrounded by picturesque scenery which cannot be surpassed in any suburb of Melbourne."*

[img – Keep your eye on Fairfield Park]

A year later this gives us a snapshot of the CH James on-going publicity. This is an advertisement for Fairfield Park Extension No.9. Notice the lure *'to artisans, tradesmen, investors, speculators and others ... all at 5 pound deposit and 2 ½ % terms.'*



[img - suburban land sale of Fairfield Park]

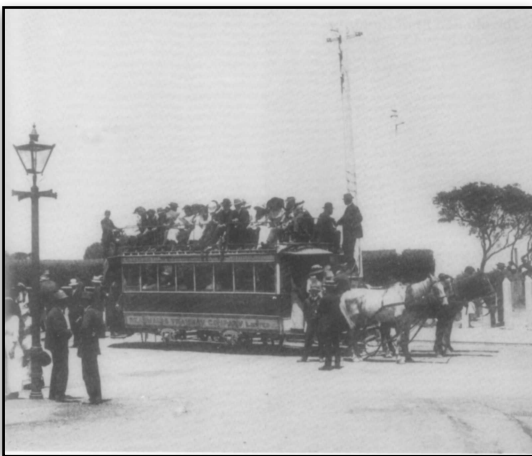
The Times gives a glowing description of a James' land sale day. A horse drawn tram had been established 20th December 1884. A year later it was still functioning bringing potential buyers to the land sales tents.

Here is the contemporary description c1885:

*"About a dozen four-horse coaches sand a number of other vehicles, decorated with flags, were laid on by the vendor, and carried to the ground in the*

*course of the afternoon fully 3000 persons. Mr James, the proprietor of the estate, has had a tramway constructed commencing at the Alphington railway [Fairfield Park Station] and running for fully a mile over land that has been sold to the furthest block that is ready*

to be run under the hammer. This is the first tramway opened in Victoria ... Arriving at the ground the usual 'champagne lunch' was there, but it was a reality in this case. Wine of the best brands was in profusion, and three large tents were provided, wherein the gifts the gods provided could be partaken of ad libitum. At the conclusion of the necessary business, an adjournment was made to the large auction tent and the genial auctioneer, steadied by the tent pole, tells the story of the land, how 'it was bought cheap' by the present long leaved proprietor at the worst time of the Berry blight, and 'will be sold cheap – for whatever you like to offer, gentlemen.' ... The sale starts and the blocks are put up in rapid succession and knocked down before the proverbial 'Jack Robinson' could be uttered. A little after six the auctioneer blandly announces 'That is the lot, gentlemen, for today ...' On making inquiries ... it was found that in the short space of three hours - 11,000 pounds worth of land had been sold."



[img - Tram at Beaumauris]

What happened to the tram? The line reached about 1½ miles long, ending about Mansfield Street in Thornbury. It used a tramcar built in South Australia and the rails were 'laid within seven days of their arrival in the colony'. It is highly unlikely the tram ran much beyond 1886 as by this time all the land had been sold. James had substantial holdings along the bayside as well. A tram similar to that in Fairfield was apparently still in use at Beaumauris on the sea-side up to WW1, established initially by him. After that there were rumours that it returned to South Australia.

**ST. JOHN'S**  
EXTENSION.  
NEXT SATURDAY, JULY 25

The great demand for land in this favourite locality has induced Mr. C. H. James to place ST. JOHN'S EXTENSION thus early on the market. It is situated right on the Alphington line of railway, and directly on the junction of the Outer Circle and Alphington railway.

**JUST A TOSS UP!**  
This is the cow with the crumpled horn,  
That tossed the gentleman all forlorn,  
To put him in mind next on Saturday morn,  
Mr. C. H. James' St. John's Extension Sale  
Takes place right on the junction of the Outer Circle  
And Alphington Railway. The time that sends him  
To purchase ensures him a small fortune.

Mr. C. H. James's Liberal Terms will be adhered to.

[img - St Johns Extension]

James would often punctuate his land sales with little ditties such as

*"Monday morning  
Rent, Rent! House Rent  
The workingman's bane. The tax that claims one-sixth of  
all his wages. The burden that keeps him struggling up  
the hill,  
Whose summit the strongest seldom reach...  
Here then is your opportunity. Now is your time.  
The tide taken in the flood leads to fortune."*

Here is an earlier advertisement - again with more of James's bad verse!



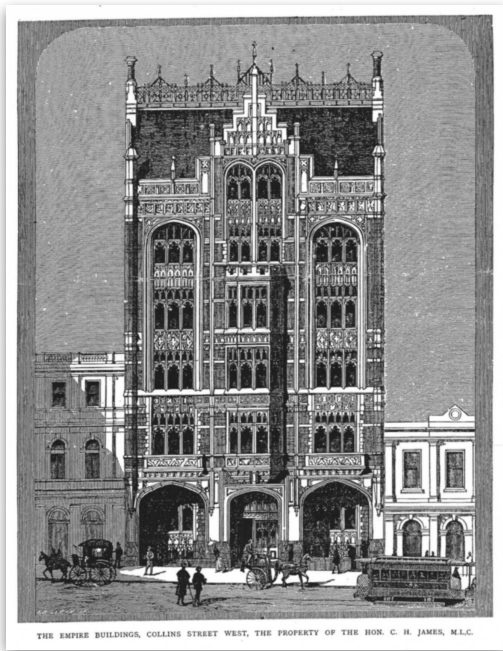


[img - Yann St Church]

In 1887 James was elected to parliament in the Legislative assembly. He had now traveled quite a distance from the North Melbourne grocery store. His land development sojourns even included South Preston.

He laid the foundation stone of the Yann St Church.

His interests in land speculation continued and in 1888 he established the Dominion Banking & Investment Company - otherwise known as the Dominion Bank. He was the largest shareholder with 30,000 of the 600,000 shares issued. As he was now such an important and wealthy citizen he needed somewhere 'to hang his hat' befitting his circumstances of course!



[img – Empire Buildings #1]

He established the Empire Building at 418 Collins Street. The building cost 40,000 pounds to build in 1887 and housed some eighty banks, building societies and insurance companies on its 56 foot frontage. One of its tenants was a James Birtwistle, architect. The facade was of imported Pacific Portland stone from New Zealand. The building was the first to use many innovative features including - fireproof terracotta timber, and the lift could move at the then astonishing rate of 20 feet / second. The staircase for the 'nervous visitor was made of imported marble. At the time the Empire Buildings would have been probably the grandest and most luxurious of the Collins Street Gothic buildings in the banking / insurance district.

By 1889 when a mini-land crash occurred - James controlled most of the shares. The Dominion Bank in reality became his own private bank. In this year he began showing interest in the Strathallen Estate in Heidelberg. His grandiose scheme in Heidelberg!



[img - Illawarra B&W]

All was well in 1888 and during these heady days of wealth James built his dream house - *Illawarra*. A 35 room mansion in Toorak off St George's Road built of bright red bricks and roofed with pink Welsh slate on over three acres of land on prime real

estate near the Yarra. There was a 250 feet tiled verandah. His neighbours were other boomers including Fink, Beaulieu, and other important later nearby residents included Sir John Monash.



[img - Illawarra detail of ironwork]

The house was heavily decorated on the exterior with cast iron work. The house was outfitted for one of his now wealthy and parliamentary status. Downstairs were a drawing-room, dining room, morning-room, serving-room, ballroom of course with an orchestra gallery, billiard-room, library, etc. Upstairs there are eight bedrooms, four bathrooms, nursery, servants quarters etc. Interestingly the house was designed by Birtwistle, the architect in

the Empire Buildings at 418 Collins St.



[img - Birtwistle shop]

A one time a Northcote resident Birtwistle designed this shop and residence in 285 High St directly opposite Mitchell St.

Preston Town Hall was designed by him also, including an elaborate 7clock tower that was never built. The architect's fame soared and sunk with James. On 17<sup>th</sup> May 1888 C H James was with Moorabbin Shire President Thomas Bent when the latter laid the foundation stone for the grand Great Southern Hotel in Beaumauris. With the complete collapse of new construction in the 1890s depression Birtwistle's career as an architect was doomed. After 1897 Birtwistle name is not mentioned.



[img - Illawarra – long shot colour]

When James' felt the financiers nipping at his heels he astutely transferred Illawarra and Bomera Station to his wife's name in early 1897.

Apparently when they came to file bankruptcy papers the maid pretended she was deaf and thus they could not be served until he was away from Victoria.



James' wife retained Illawarra until her death. She leased it in turn to George Chirside, and later Mrs M Wynne who ran it as a guest house. After WWI it was sold to Mrs Susan Eakins and the estate was subdivided in 1925. With its remaining 2 ½ acres the house was bought in 1940 by William Leslie Ryan — appropriately a Melbourne wine retailer and in 1966 he presented it to the National Trust of Victoria. It is now part of a girl's school.

James' listed his assets in 1893 including the Empire Buildings (£120,000) Strathallen Estate (£130,000) Rosanna Land - 840 acres (£168,000), Kentucky Station (in NSW – £115,000), Bomera Station (also in NSW – £110,000). This did not include the house Illawarra.

In 1889 when Sutherland's Melbourne Metropolis was published James' name was already sullied. Whilst there is a lengthy description of the Empire Buildings Charles Henry James is not mentioned!



[img – Grave closeup]

By 1895 debts were rising against James. The Dominion Bank was wound up in a most unusual way. An individual - Mr John Haines who was owed twelve pounds pursued James into insolvency, despite being offered the cash. It is more than likely he was working on behalf of the major creditors of the Strathallen Estate. James left Melbourne and settled at Bomera Station. In May 1897 after much delaying tactics C H James was to be declared bankrupt. In 1898 he appealed against the

insolvency, which was upheld as he was dying from cirrhosis of the liver. He died on 2nd October 1898, aged nearly 50 years, in Strathfield, Sydney. Two days later he was buried in Kew.

Despite his apparent land wealth, there was now a depression and his property assets were almost worthless. His estate paid 6 ¾ d in the pound on debts of £850,000. He is duly buried in Kew at Boorondarra Cemetery. His grave at the time, in view of the terminus of the Melbourne Tramway & Omnibus Co. The horse-drawn tramway, a subtle reminder of his earlier Fairfield Park Tramway.



[img – Grave long shot]

Early literature indicates that James' grave in Kew is unassuming. For a site that is over a century old, there has been some major upkeep and the recent erection of a large cross. 9Saturday, 19 April 2014Saturday, 19 April 2014I wonder who has paid for this?



## The Legacy of Charles Henry James - Landboomer and Speculator:

- Long straight streets laid in familiar grid pattern;
- Speedy settlement in estates;
- The house - Illawarra;
- Housing for everyone - well almost;
- Use of architect Birtwistle;
- First public tramway in Victoria;
- Early Victorian land boomer;
- Possibly Victoria's richest man for a short period;
- Established popularity of many suburbs around Melbourne including - Prahran, Heidelberg, Bayside suburbs, and the northern suburbs of Northcote, Fairfield, Thornbury and South Preston;
- The concept of an affordable house;

and

... of course ...

vast debts of 850,000 pounds!

However Charles Henry James did fulfill the ultimate dream: Anyone can become a millionaire, A Member of Parliament – even an immigrant Irish farmer's son!

— 000 —