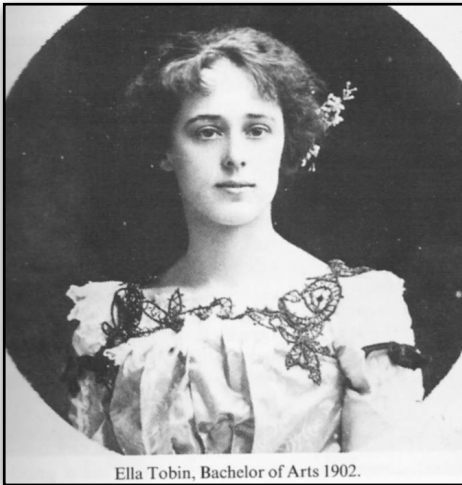


## Northcote Significant Women – Ella Latham (1878 -1964)

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[img – Ella Latham: Graduate]

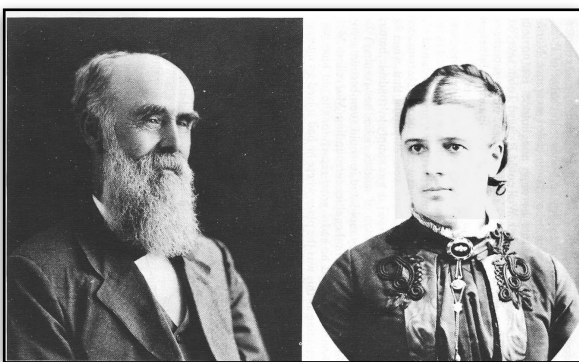
Ella Latham, born 1878, was the daughter and only child of Richard and Fanny Tobin, pioneer teacher and community affairs activist in Northcote. Richard had migrated from England in 1863, at 27 years. He met and married Fanny (nee Mathews) ten years later. He had taken up the post of school teacher at the Wesleyan Church Hall in High St. The first to do so.



[img – Wesleyan old Church]

The church hall (1854 – arguably Northcote’s oldest public building) is still standing and is now part of a café – ‘Wesley Anne’ at 248-250 High St - on the east side. When built the church hall served many functions. Not only as a place of worship, but school house, public meeting place and council chamber. After ten years Richard Tobin was appointed head teacher of the newly opened Helen

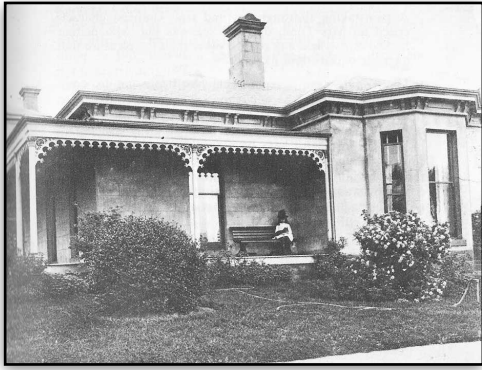
St State School in 1874.



[img – Richard & Fanny Tobin]

Fanny, his new wife, was his assistant teacher. He often complained with his drinking buddies at the now demolished Bridge Inn Hotel, near the Merri Creek, against the pollution by the unregulated noxious local industries. Calling for a meeting at the Wesleyan School Room in 1883, Richard lodged a petition for the severance of Northcote from Jika Jika – to

be self governing. So that Northcote could regulate the industries. Because of this petition and his ongoing keen community involvement - Richard Tobin could justifiably be called the ‘Father of Northcote’.



[img – Buena Vista 1890s]

The Tobins lived at 'Buena Vista', 51 James St. Northcote.

Ella, the only child, was born here in 1878. In this photo she is seated on the verandah.

Fanny Tobin was much more than a competent teacher with her husband in the first school in Northcote. She was one of the early social movers in Northcote. Founding member of the Northcote

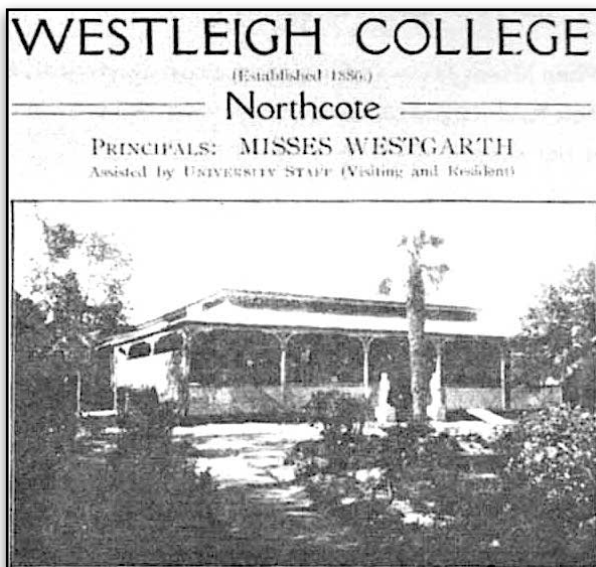
Benevolent Society in 1888. The objectives being to assist families in temporary difficulties in addition helping the aged and the ill. Whilst the Tobins took an active interest in the social affairs of Northcote, Richard never sought public office.

It must be remembered that at the time it was unusual for a professional woman to be working post marriage – 'a wife's place was very much at home'. However both she and her husband saw to it that their daughter's education was of some importance. The mother's concept of hard work and social work did rub off onto Ella, the daughter.

The house name 'Buena Vista' was rather apt. On a clear day one can clearly see all the way to the Dandenongs from that porch at the top of Ruckers Hill.

Primary education was at Helen Street school, where her parents were teachers. Later she attended University High School. This was one of the very few high schools in Melbourne. Ella's education reflected her parent's goals. At the turn of the century women rarely sought higher education, nor was it was to attain. Women were discriminated against. Their perceived role was in the home, attending to the husband and to bear and care for the children.

She entered the University of Melbourne in 1898. This is a picture of the young Ella, an early female graduate of Arts in 1902. Like her mother she was an active society woman. Playing tennis, bonding with the few women on campus. During this time she meets her future husband.



[img – Wesleigh College]

After university, in 1905, she taught at the school around the corner, Westleigh College. (Interestingly not for her parents alma mater – Helen Street.) Though there appears to be a connection – her father played tennis there. The school was located on the grounds of the old mansion 'Sunnyside' on top of Rucker's Hill. Now the site of the Church of the Epiphany built in brutalist style in red brick.

During this period Ella displays her

passion for hard work and over achievement. Collaborating with Jessie Webb – and writing an anthology of verse for matriculation students. It was duly published in 1909 – entitled ‘Phases of Literature from Pope to Browning’. The book was unusual as it detailed the lives of the poets and the circumstances about which the passages of verse were written as well as the history of poetry.

It appears that the man she was to marry, John Grieg Latham was her first and true love. He was completing law at Melbourne University after having earlier graduated in arts. John’s background was poorer than Ella’s. They exchanged correspondence regularly with restrained love letters. They were both strong Methodists and played tennis and other sports with the Methodist and University clubs. She often refused invitations to go to dances – stating that “Jack is no dancer”.



[img – Wedding]

Finally they married in 1907, being unofficially engaged since 1902. This is their wedding photograph. The next ten years would prove difficult. Ella’s new life, that of a mother and support for her husband. Richard, the first child was born in 1909.

Jack Latham was now seriously bus, having been admitted to the bar in 1904. Lecturing at

Melbourne University, running a burgeoning law practice and supplementing the family’s income as a correspondent to two London newspaper! This was a man destined for success. The Lathams were not like most of Northcote’s working class. They lived high on Ruckers Hill with its wonderful views. Life was turning a corner for the young family. Freda (Winifred Maria) , a sickly child, was born in 1912. Peter Grieg was the second son. Only Peter would outlive his parents passing.

John Grieg Latham was becoming politically active and joined the United Australia Party. Whilst he argued strongly for conscription he was a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference after WWI. As a now successful lawyer with higher aspirations he entered politics in 1922, taking the seat of Kooyong. Which he would hold for twelve years. It was rumoured that he left a £15,000 per annum law practice for £1500 to become a politician.



[img - John, Ella & Joe Lyons]

Latham had a distinguished, though very conservative political career. The highlight when Latham stepped aside to allow Joseph Lyons to become leader of United Australia Party (the political party of business interests before the Liberal Party). When Lyon became Prime Minister in 1931, Latham's

'reward' was the position of Attorney General and then deputy prime minister in the Lyons government. In 1934 Latham did not stand for his seat. It now being won by Robert Menzies. He which he would then represent Kooyong for thirty-two years. Transforming the UAP into the Liberal Party and becoming an iconic Prime Minister.

Though no longer a sitting member John Latham's political star was still ascending. He appointed Chief Justice of the High Court in 1935, as well as being knighted. This was an extremely powerful position, which Latham held until 1952. Inevitably he locked horns a number of times with two other Significant Northcote Women - J o a n Rosanove and Marie Pitt. He was, not surprisingly, extremely conservative and anti-communist. Latham would have judged valid the Communist Party Dissolution Act of 1950, but was outvoted by the other judges on the bench. Despite this he had lifelong interest in Japan and was appointed the first Australian ambassador to Japan post war.



[img - 57 James St.]

In 1908, a year after their marriage, Ella and Jack built their first house at 57 James St, just four doors from Ella's parent's family home 'Buena Vista'. Probably on land of the Tobin's property.

During the early period of her marriage Ella was part of the development of two important women's groups. The Catalysts and Lyceum Clubs. She was one of the

nineteen founding members of the Catalysts in 1910, and also the Lyceum Club in 1912. They were established as meeting point for women graduates and other women who distinguished themselves in art, music, literature, philosophy or public service. Ella was president 1925/6. Prominent Lyceum members have included: Elizabeth Murdoch, Pru Boyd (married Kenneth Myer), Margaret Guilfoyle, Lorna Sely (early female surgeon - 1947 and founder and consultant surgeon at Monash medical Centre Breast Clinic). Anna Brennan another founding member and first woman to graduate in Law from Melbourne University in 1909, practiced as a solicitor for fifty years. Ella was in good company!



[img - Flete House]

In 1921 the Lathams left Northcote and moved to the more upmarket Armadale (Malvern) purchasing 'Flete' in Flete Avenue.

The same year they bought land in Ferny Creek in the Dandenongs and built a country house naming it 'Buena Vista' after her Ella's parent's house in Northcote. A year after, in 1922 John Latham was elected to federal parliament.



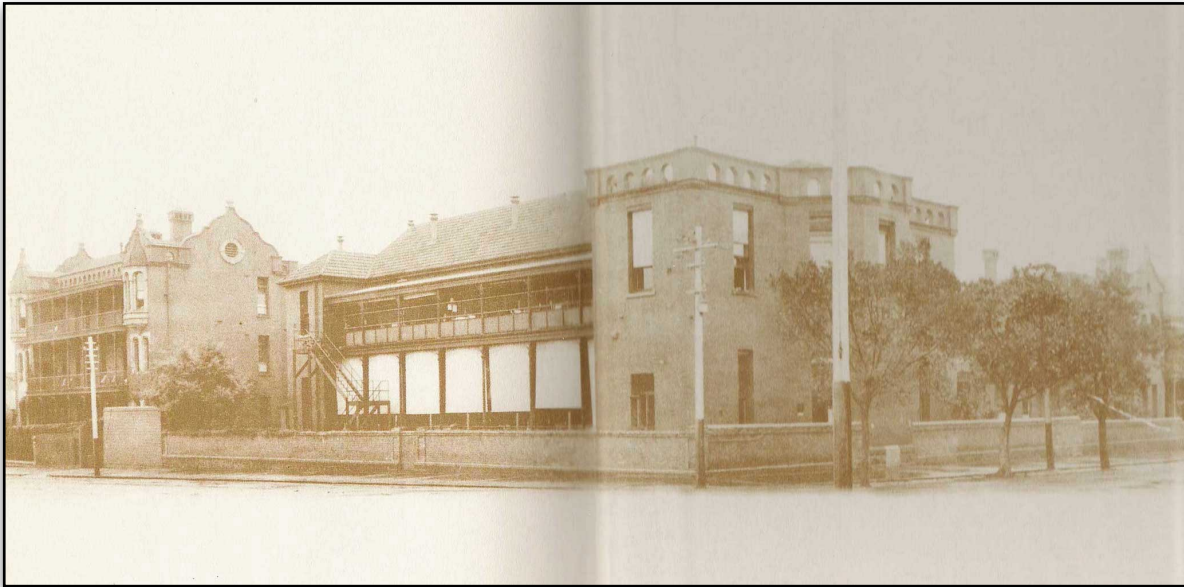
[img - Ella Latham, 1937]

It seems that whilst her husband was representing the seat of Kooyong, Ella Latham was content with the life of a politician's wife and mother. She of course had her work with the Catalysts and Lyceum clubs. Various fund raising projects as well. Once Jack left politics her life took a new direction.

In 1933 Ella Latham embarked at aged 54 on a new phase of her life when she was elected President of the Children's Hospital. A position she was to hold for twenty-one years. Though since 1923 she had had a close connection as president of the Hawthorn Auxiliary of the hospital. Joining the committee of management from 1926.

At this time - her up-bringing in Northcote, the marriage to Latham and her involvement in the intellectual clubs of Melbourne, knowing and meeting all the

socialites - galvanised into her new found rigour work for the Children's Hospital. At that time the hospital was based on the site of the old Redmond Barry's house and grounds corner Pelham and Rathdowne Streets, Carlton. (Northcote Note: Barry's architect was Joseph Reed, who had designed Northcote Town Hall).



[img – Children's Hospital – Carlton]

Under her tenure the Children's Hospital went from a charity institution to a powerful and forward thinking teaching hospital with strong connections with the University of Melbourne. She created the vibrant Royal Children's that all parents know about and love.

At the same time another of her great talents aided the hospital - that of raising funds.

After politics, In 1939 Jack Latham was elected Chancellor at Melbourne University. This wasn't too far away from the hospital and his wife.

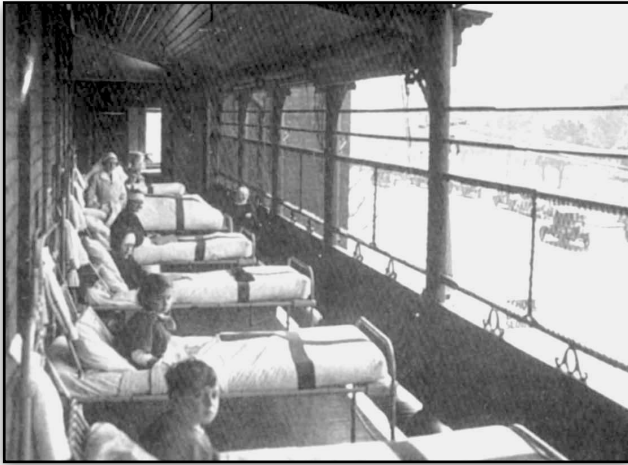
During Ella Latham's tenure she was known for establishing committees and boards to press projects ahead. Selecting the best talent, then bowing out completely when it had found its direction. It seems that she didn't need the recognition. Getting the particular project up and running was her reward.

Her achievements at the Children's Hospital whilst President from 1933-1954, or whilst she was part of the management are significant with long lasting results and affecting the way hospitals are operated. Some of these include:

Reinforced the managing of the hospital by women. At the time many male doctors did not like the 'petticoat brigade' being in positions of management and power;

Development of Social Sciences at University of Melbourne;

At the forefront of Paediatric services in Australia because of the research connections with the university;



[img – Children’s Hospital – Carlton]

Belief of fair and humane treatment of children;

Paid medical staff – it was the first hospital to do so;

Turning a small fund raising idea into the now very successful Good Friday Appeal;

Introduction of specialists to hospitals - speech therapists, almoners (social workers) as assistance to families.

Ella understood that often the illnesses necessitated a social role in

healing as well;

Links to Birmingham Hospital in the UK;

Establishment of various outreach services in outer suburbs of Melbourne;

Development of virology research laboratories on site. This led to a lessening of childhood stays in hospital and treatment of various diseases and disorders;

Her chosen successor was Elizabeth Murdoch in 1954, a fellow Catalyst and committee member. Murdoch would run the Committee with a far more democratic involvement its members.

Latham’s style was that of a ‘hands-on approach – an inner committee made all the crucial decisions. She was autocratic in management style – possibly suited to the period when strong direction was needed due to the massive changes occurring in health care.

Though The new hospital (at the time) in Parkville would be built under Murdoch, it was Ella that secured the land in 1948.

Ella Latham seemed tireless. In 1936 she had founded the Victorian Society for Crippled Children, but soon retired from Vice Presidency soon after it was successfully launched. This was a typical Latham approach to establishing and managing things. When in charge she would be dogmatic and ruthless. It was only in 1958 the Society awarded her the honour as its founder!

The Latham’s only daughter, Freda, despite being a diabetic, graduated bachelor of Arts at Melbourne University, like her mother. Then like her father she gained another discipline - Diploma of Social Sciences in 1938 – quite possibly one of the first such graduates. Three years earlier Freda had voluntarily established a library at Children’s Hospital’s Frankston Orthopaedic centre. Freda was appointed Medical Social Worker at Children’s Hospital 1940-44, and then Prince Henry’s 1945-50. Unfortunately her career would be tragically cut short. Passing away in 1953 aged only forty-one years.

Despite Ella and John’s hard public work their private life had many tragic times. The Lathams had lost their two eldest children early. The first son, Richard who had shown outstanding promise in legal issues and was clearly destined to follow his father at the bar, was killed in the war. The family kept their home affairs private and were stoic at these strained times. Sir John had retired from High Court in 1952. Only the youngest

son Lt Col Peter Grieg Latham survived post 1950s. However he was in the military forces and often away from his now older parents with his own family.



[img - Ella 1963]

Both Ella and John passed away in the same year - 1964 within four months of each other. She had had a long and fruitful life - the Royal Children's Hospital an excellent testimony to her hard work and diligence. There is an Ella Latham theatre in the current building. She had come a long way from James St. Jack is remembered with a suburb in Canberra.

A modest publication 'From Charity to Teaching Hospital' by Howard Williams was produced in 1989 which includes much detail about her. Ella Latham and her achievements deserve a far more substantial telling of her interesting life.

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