

Catherine Mary Burdett & the Exhibition Boot Co: Housewife, Mother, Suffragette, Businesswoman

In 1872 Francis Burdett and Julian Rolens established a boot company in Fitzroy. With the 1880 International Exhibition in Melbourne, the company was renamed Exhibition Boot Co. Burdett bought out his partner in 1891, but died four years later having established a substantial boot making business. He left an estate of some £25,000 to his wife – a somewhat sizable amount in 1895!

His wife Catherine Mary took over the business assisted by their two sons, though it is she who takes control – advertisements for labour at the Fitzroy factory are under her name. Under her guidance the Exhibition Boot Co branches out by establishing retail stores.

In 1902 Catherine moved the factory from its three storey original premises in Fitzroy, to a purpose-built contemporary single floor layout at 54 Westgarth St. The company garnered a lengthy article in Punch on the company’s success and their many varieties of boots and shoes. By then the company has 16 branches across Victoria and 100 people are employed in the factory.

The Burdett family lived at ‘The Lawn’ at 51 Cunningham St in Westgarth, near the original Northcote South railway station from at least 1873. The house was quite large and on a good sized block. There were eight rooms, garden, yard, coach-house, stable, paddock, gas and water. Originally the block took up most of the land to Ross St. They often advertised for maids – ‘*Woman wanted: housework, plain cooking, plain beds, no washing*’.

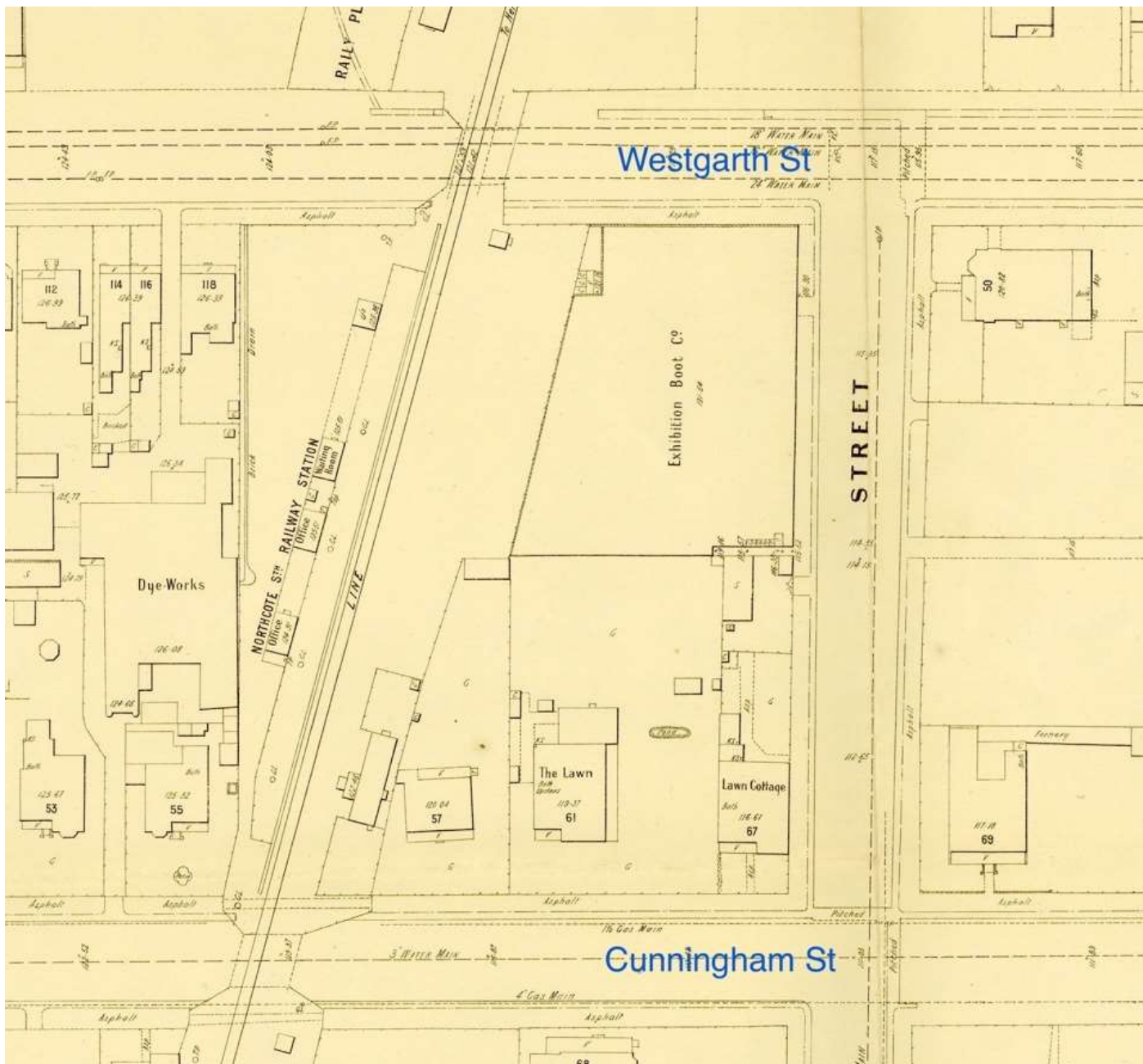


1891 was a significant year for women. The ‘Women’s Suffrage Petition’ of some 30,000 signatories was presented to the (Colony of Victoria) parliament in an effect to gain the right of women to vote. The Burdetts in Cunningham St signed the petition: Francis (husband), Catherine Mary and William F (son).



Extract from Women’s Suffrage petition showing the Burdett’s signatures.

Catherine Burdett was interested in woman’s rights and helped establish the Northcote Branch of Women’s Suffragette Movement. This probably accounts for the good working conditions for women in the new Exhibition Boot Co factory in Westgarth. Over 40 women/girls were employed, in addition to sixty plus men. They had their own lunch room, toilets and ‘accessories’ – an example of women being treated with dignity at the time.



MMBW Plan 1267 showing location of the Exhibition Boot Co factory after 1902

In 1907, at about 63 years old, Catherine moved away from Northcote and lived the rest of her years in Sandringham, overlooking Port Phillip Bay. Still head-strong and active in local affairs there, she passed away in 1929.

Sadly the company's success did not continue: by 1916 the business was advertised for sale. Fires were not uncommon in the leather trade - unfortunately a number of the company's retail stores were burnt and a large fire gutted the Westgarth factory premises, when there was not enough water pressure from the mains to control the inferno.

One of Burdett's sons retained a connection with the trade, listed as a director with Matthews Boot Co from 1921.

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