

Turret (Tower) House – Westbourne Grove. (c1854 – 1936-9)

P Michell, 2019

Arguably one of the grandest of Northcote's lost early pioneer buildings. Complete with expansive grounds overlooking the Merri Creek vista. Was described as a miniature mansion in 1860s.

Abutting St Georges Rd the house and grounds of some nine acres covered the area of Westbourne Grove to the north and Gordon Gve to the south. Eastern boundary would have been the end of James St. The house and extensive grounds pre-date the railway cutting by almost four decades. With its tall lookout turret, the stone built house was located just beneath James St on the hill facing west. Early access was via Westbourne Gve, along what is now Park St.

The property was directly opposite the Dr McCarthy's Inebriate's Retreat on St Georges Rd. (This is now the site of Northcote High School and Merri Park.)

Totally forgotten, this former grand building and grounds was home to some interesting people. It ended its days as a rooming house before being demolished.

Turret House was built sometime in the 1850s for **Nehemiah Guthridge** MHR (?-1861). A merchant in Lonsdale St. Melbourne. Guthridge was a Port Phillip Colonist and early politician. Auditor for the Colonial Insurance Co in 1857, and was interested in public good – being on the committee for the Northcote Mechanics Institute in 1856. (This was on the north-west corner of Westbourne Gve and High St. Demolished in 1880s.)

The house was reported to have cost £9000, the freestone, doors, windows and other fittings having all having been imported from England.

With Guthridge's death in 1861 some of the land was sold. Advertisements spruiked the uniqueness of the property and grounds.

'... beautiful pleasure grounds, lakes, grottoes, bridges, conservatory, grapery [vines?], fruit and kitchen gardens, containing 9 acres of the most productive soil, securely fenced, and having a carriage drive to the house.'

'The house is a 'Beautifully situated miniature mansion. Contains on ground floor – entrance hall, dining room - 24 x 16 [feet], drawing room – 21 x 16, library, and ample domestic arrangements. Bedroom floor contains six large and commodious bedrooms, leading into the balcony. The turret has two rooms, overlooking extensive green pasturage. Conservatory – 36 x 18. Six acres of land plus a kitchen garden of three acres planted with 250 choice fruit trees and grape vines. Three-stall stable, coach house, loft and men's room.'

Soon after it was purchased by **Leonard Robinson** (c1827-1880), who ran General Drapery in Collins St. Melbourne. He was active in the Wesleyan church in Melbourne. Highly likely he would have connections to both old and new Wesleyan churches in High St. His wife was the daughter of Wesleyan minister.

Robinson was successful businessman. He died at the house in 1880, aged 53 years. The estate was valued at £4700. His wife stayed in the house for another six years.

Around this time a new story described a raid on the property –

‘Boys fruit stealing are becoming a regular nuisance to the residents On Monday last a regular raid was made on the grounds of the late Mr Leonard Robinson, of Westbourne Gve, Northcote, and five boys, were arrested by Mr. Ladham, employed as gardener, and by Constable Finch, of the Northcote Police.

Swift in his History of Northcote describes an early memory of 1885 and this house:

‘Turning into Westbourne Grove, the south side was vacant [Town Hall was not built until 1889] until coming to [the] "Turret House" property. [A] lovely place, the grounds extending to the pipe track and back to Clarke St A sweeping drive led to the house; an artificial lake, with willows surrounding, on the flat at the foot of the hill. Opposite this estate (North of Westbourne Gve) was Brown's farm, on which has been erected the home of the Little Sisters of the Poor. From the hill, overlooking the area between the Pipe Track and the Merri Creek, a delightful view could be gained. The green pastures, sleek well bred cows grazing, the irregular course of the Creek, the stately mansion at [Sumner's] Stony Park on the left side, and the wide expanse of open fields, with [Mt.] Macedon looming in the dim distance.

Swift is writing this in mid 1920s, more than likely from personal observations. He would have seen the estate around the time of Mrs Robinson’s death.

It was at this time that the Turret House estate was broken up. Mrs Robinson had not been living there for a few years. By 1885 William Thompson had bought the house. In 1887 it was advertised as the ‘*Crown of Northcote - Mrs Robinson’s Estate*’. Land subdivided into 85 housing blocks. Advertised as:

with water laid on ... one minute from Fitzroy tram terminus ... £5 deposit balance at 6%

The house (#85) would soon be surrounded by other dwellings. All the land would be subdivided into housing lots. Aberdeen Grove and Park Sts become part of the new subdivision.

William Thompson (c1836-1901) was a merchant of Brunswick. Formerly had businesses in Clifton Hill, Northcote and Preston. Interestingly he died on 3 Dec, 1901 in a horse buggy. Was pronounced dead by Dr Beckett, after the carriage returned to Northcote after visiting a number of not available doctors. William was the father of J G Thompson, a councilor.

Like Mrs Robinson, his wife, Anne, continued living at Turret House. She died in 1919 aged 86 years at her son's residence at Mt Drummond in Wollongong.

By 1920 **Joseph A Angus** takes over the house. Angus & Co ran a significant inkworks and bottle factory on Arthurton Rd near Merri Ck. This company invented Clag – a popular paper paste. The house would stay in the family until at least 1935. By 1924 the house is known as 'Tower House'. Soon after Colin K Angus is listed.

From at least 1930 the house is being tenanted. Though Colin K Angus is still listed.

The house was still standing in 1935 when The Herald did a feature – 'Northcote and Preston Busy Suburbs'.

Some time after the mini mansion was demolished and two s Arts & Craft style houses replaced it.

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