

## NEW FARM AND DISTRICTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### LAUNCH OF

### ***“HOMES with HISTORY on the New Farm Peninsula” – Written by Gerard Benjamin***

### **By The Honourable Penelope Wensley AC**

Governor of Queensland 2008-2014 (Former Patron: Royal Historical Society of Queensland, Queensland Family History Society, National Trust of Queensland, Royal Queensland Art Society, Teneriffe Festival)

Merthyr Road Uniting Church, New Farm, Saturday, 28 February, 2015

State Member for Brisbane Central, Ms Grace Grace MP; Brisbane City Councillor Vicki Howard; President, New Farm and Districts Historical Society, Mr Ross Garnett BEM, Other Committee members, Members, Friends and supporters of the NFDHS; President, National Trust of Australia (Queensland), Dr Ian Galloway and other NTAQ members; Author and Historian, Mr Gerard Benjamin; Exhibiting artists, David Hinchliffe, Philippa Webb, Liesbeth Thie, Stewart Free, Trevor Downes, Jan Jorgensen — and curator, Judi Kahn; Ladies and Gentlemen.

I join Ross in acknowledging the Jagera and Turrbal peoples who drew sustenance from this rich riverside region before European settlement (and who, according to some students of indigenous history, called this fertile peninsula and its river flats ‘*Binkin-ba*’ place of tortoises).

It is with great pleasure that I find myself once again in this beautiful part of Brisbane, once again in the congenial company of fellow lovers of Queensland history and heritage; and once again, launching a book for the New Farm and Districts Historical Society.

As indicated earlier, that book was the second in this series of publications the Society has commissioned and published.

The First – “*Reflections on New Farm*”, co-authored by the late Gloria Grant and Gerard Benjamin, was published in 2008; the second, “*Tides of Teneriffe: Ebbs and Flows of a Riverside Suburb*”, by Vicki Bridgstock, in November 2009 (Queensland’s Sesquicentenary year); and now, after a gap of several years, here we have the trifecta, with ‘*Homes with History*’.

Having agreed to undertake the launch, I was eager to discover how the author – Gerard – would select the houses to be featured and how he would organise the mass of material involved in – (as he describes it in his *Introduction*) – putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

The ‘more or less’ chronological approach was logical; less obvious, the decision to include houses long disappeared, until the bolder ambition became evident: to use the idiosyncratic snapshots of each home selected, to introduce us to a much larger portrait – that of the development of Brisbane

and of many of the figures and families who influenced the growth and progress of the city – and of Queensland.

A bold undertaking indeed.

The individual stories are absorbing and the wealth of detail used to construct each chapter – the facts and figures, old maps, sketches, portraits, the grainy, historic photographs, the selection of letters, advertisements, auction and sale notices, newspaper reports and more – sufficient to impress and satisfy the most demanding of professional chroniclers, architects, archivists, historians and conservationists.

It isn't only the professionals and specialists with a liking for detail and precision who will be pleased. Locals will surely love learning more about 'THEIR' neighbourhood, and tourists and visitors will equally surely welcome what is effectively a new and different guide to discovering new and different aspects of the New Farm landscape.

Much has been made of the Woolstores precinct, of the suburb's riverside and multicultural character, of its interesting connections with our military history, celebrated in the Teneriffe Festival and the Submariners Walk Heritage Trail, but this book involves a different construct. With the river as the picturesque backdrop, the boundary of a unique amphitheatre, we are invited to move deeper into the heart of the peninsula, making our way through its streets, to the houses that were built and rebuilt here, and then once we have our bearings – arriving for example at *Moana*, *Amity* or *Coronet Court* – or seeing in our mind's eye – with the assistance of photos and descriptions, buildings long gone – we are then enticed to explore even further, each chapter recounting in rich detail not only the architectural history of a particular location, but introducing us to the people who lived there.

As Gerard says: "This book is really about people".

All who take the time to read the book will enjoy the parade of personalities that pass through its pages – their diverse interests and occupations mirroring the development of the colony, State and city: pastoralists and graziers, politicians and public servants; solicitors and surveyors, court officials and bankers; merchants and magistrates; clerics and Calvinists; builders and property dealers, butchers and milk-deliverers; doctors and pharmacists, teachers and poets, artists and musicians, journalists and historians.

We meet the first Sheriff, Postmaster and Police Magistrate – William Anthony Brown, whose sons' names live on in the names of *Villiers*, *Lechmere*, *Bailey* and *Charles* Streets.

We find the forerunners of today's real estate agents and publicists, proclaiming the wonderful attractions of this prime piece of real estate:... advertising "beautifully situated residence", "well-built dwellings", with 'river views' in "*a healthy locality with the river in front*"; "*Highly desirable Gentlemen's Suburban Villa Residence...replete with every domestic requisite, either for comfort or luxury*".

By 1864, just five years after Queensland became a separate colony, advertisements were lauding New Farm as: "*The most favourite suburb of Brisbane... possessing all the charms of rustic retirement either for villa residences or the homestead of the mechanic*".

In the 1880s, they urged purchase of properties that offered unique benefits, including “*elevation, aspect, convenience, exemption from fogs and inexhaustive views*”.

Not quite the language of 2015 – which – according to a well known local Real Estate company website I consulted yesterday – lists among New Farm’s benefits today, its ‘*cool sensibility*’, its ‘*latte lifestyle and low maintenance living*’ – and the fact that ‘*New Farm’s blend of old and new makes it a retro-cool playground for all ages*’, but for all that, the sales pitch seems somehow not so dissimilar. (Perhaps that’s another book, Gerard – tracking the history of New Farm peninsula real estate promotions!)

But back to this book.

As a former Governor, I took particular pleasure in the references that touched on the role of the Governor: in the chapter on ‘*Wynberg*’, we find one of its owners, John Abraham, attending the Governor’s ‘levee’ in 1859, along with other “*leading lights of Brisbane*” – as well as balls at the old and new Government Houses;

The *Teneriffe House* chapter notes that “*the spot had once been considered as a site for a new Government House*” (1882).

The *Kingsholme* chapter has the Governor of 1864 joining the funeral cortege of that first Sheriff, considered “*one of the most competent men in the public service*”;

The *GFS House* chapter notes that the GFS House for Service Women, previously *Risdon*, – complete with air raid shelters – was opened by Governor Sir Leslie Wilson, in December 1942;

The chapter on *Amity* features Governor Wilson again – this time making a private visit to Thomas Welsby’s ‘well-stocked library; which, for this audience of historians and history-lovers, later formed the foundation collection of (the later Royal) Historical Society of Queensland. Such delicious historic morsels! There are many more for you to discover and savour for yourselves, but I was happy to find one of my favourite words in recent years – “*gubernatorial*”, included by Gerard at the beginning of the ‘*Doon*’ Chapter, where he noted that the first tenant of “*Doon*” in Moreton Street, Albert Victor Drury, Clerk of the Executive Council, moved in the colony’s “*rarefied political, legal and gubernatorial circles*”.

Those with other specialised interests – in music or migrants, in gardens, flowers or fashion perhaps? – could equally pick through the chapters to find relevant references. Floral references abound – many associated with entertaining – and New Farm certainly seems always to have been a place for parties:

You can read about “*fresh and pretty*” lawns and gardens “*showing up the light dresses of visitors to advantage*”, of “*Duke Stewart’s band being stationed on a verandah, playing many delightful operatic selections*”, or about the dance arranged at *Teneriffe House* in

1924 by the committee of The Ladies Harbour Lights Guild, in aid of the building fund of the Seamen's Institute, where *"dance music was supplied by Miss Emmie Stewart's Orchestra"*.

Miss Stewart's orchestra played at another benefit at Stratton the following year, this time in aid of the CWA, where Mrs Longland-Marshall *"received her guests in a gown of navy Marocain, showing touches of Oriental embroidery (topped off with) a black taffetas hat, finished with an osprey mount"*.

There is an even more detailed description, in the *Roseville* chapter, of another New Farm matron of "impeccable" fashion sense – Mrs Anna Cowell, widow of wealthy Brisbane hotelier, Thomas Stanley Cowell:

*Mrs Cowell wore a handsome black brocade gown, with collar and vest in gathered pink chiffon, the collar enriched with square motifs in jet embroidery set at intervals above the chiffon, and a small black bonnet in drawn satin lisse, edged with rustic satin straw, arranged with bow across front in shot salmon and gold velvet caught with jet ornaments, cluster of soft green-and-pink French roses, and aigrette in ribbon-grass.*

Not all the references are as elegant or flattering to New Farm, the peninsula and its citizens. Scattered through the text, across the decades, are references to robberies and stabbings, to there being run-down areas, rife with drugs and prostitution, of the suburb having some *"seedy territory"* and being *"a dodgy place"* – and towards the end of the book, we are reminded that as recently as the early 1990s, the Newstead-Teneriffe area had become *"a barren landscape which begged for renewal or levelling"*.

The author's intention, in offering that reminder – in this book about homes with history – becomes clear, however, in his final chapter – *Urban Renewal* – which provides a brief survey of the impulses and influences that combined to enable a different ending to be written for the larger story of life on the New Farm Peninsula. That vision – of creating a new form of inner city living – and how it has been fulfilled – might actually merit another book all on its own – but for the purpose of this particular book, it is the preservation and honouring of history and heritage that claims pride of place – and to which the last word is given, recognising that the opportunity to live closer to history can confer great advantage – enhancing the quality of life of individuals and of their communities.

I thank and congratulate Gerard for the meticulous research he undertook to produce this exceptional record;

I thank the many people who provided material to enrich its content – including through the provision of family information, photos and other memorabilia and oral histories;

I thank the artists and photographers whose works grace its pages and in particular, congratulate David Hinchliffe on his collaboration with Gerard on this important project –

providing both the Preface, featuring David's 2014 painting of 'Kent Street Houses', and the very appealing front cover illustration of 'Kingsholme House". The warm colours and dappled, clear light illuminating the house subtly evoke and complement Gerard's purpose to make us think of these houses also in a different light.

As his choice of title makes clear, this book is about HOMES – and he set out to illuminate our understanding and appreciation of their histories, as the stories – not so much of bricks and mortar, of construction and design, of destruction and adaptation – (although all those elements are there, painstakingly documented for posterity) but of the people and of the families, who brought warmth and gave life and character to these buildings.

Animating and enlivening the past, to make it interesting for current and future generations – helping them to appreciate its richness and understand its significance, is one of the key purposes of organisations such as the New Farm and Districts Historical Society and like-minded community organisations throughout Queensland and Australia, including the National Trust and RHSQ, represented here today.

My contact with such groups during my six years as Governor was one of the most pleasurable aspects of my work.

The passion and enthusiasm that people bring to exploring their own regions and localities, to discovering and celebrating their distinctive identities, are everywhere evident – and impressive, but I must say that here in New Farm, Newstead and Teneriffe, that enthusiasm seems especially pronounced.

I expect that those fortunate to live in this colourful community would be able to offer many reasons for this, but few, surely, could deny that the New Farm and Districts Historical Society has played a very special role in building interest in New Farm's history and heritage.

I compliment and thank everyone involved, from the Society's inception 20 years ago, to today, on all that has been achieved – newsletters, web sites, heritage trail walks, guest speaker programs, art exhibitions, festivals – and of course, the landmark publications, to which we are adding today, with the launch of "Homes with History".

I have little doubt it will enjoy similar success to its predecessors; "Reflections" has had three print runs and has sold 3,500 copies to date; and 'Tides' is steadily advancing towards completion of its first print run of 1,000 copies.

That's a very gratifying response from the community – and a pleasing validation, for the Brisbane City Council, I believe, of its decision to commit funds to support all three books: the first time, from the *Gambling Benefit Community Fund*; the second, from the *BCC Suburban Initiative Fund*; and this time, from the *Lord Mayor's Suburban Initiative Fund*. I thank the Council for its consistent support and look forward, Madam Councillor, to this

being maintained in the future. The enthusiastic attendance here this afternoon suggests any future such investment in the New Farm community would be “a safe bet”.

Apropos “safe bets” and “gambling benefits”, I referred at the beginning of my remarks to this third publication making the trifecta. I’m not a betting person myself – (other than the usual annual “flutter” on the Melbourne Cup) – so I took the trouble to check the word “trifecta” to make sure that I was using it correctly – and discovered, to my delight, that not only does it indeed mean a triple success, but in betting parlance, the trifecta is ‘*a variation of the perfecta*’.

I couldn’t think of a better word for this publication that aimed at perfection in every detail – as one would expect from an historian and researcher of the calibre of Gerard Benjamin.

For those who know their Latin and the doctrines of the Catholic Church – in particular, the doctrine of “*Communitas Perfecta*” or “*Societas Perfecta*” (Perfect Community/Perfect Society) – there is another point of resonance with the strong, proud community of New Farm and the vigorous Historical Society that strives to promote and protect its history and heritage for all to enjoy.

The origin of that Christian doctrine can be traced back to a very different time in history – to the third century before Christ, when that great philosopher, Aristotle, advanced the proposition that what creates happiness and harmony in a community is its ability to draw on the resources within itself.

Recording aspects of the history of this small, picturesque pocket of land and the people who settled here, in a State, country and continent unknown and unimagined by the Greek philosophers, may seem insignificant in the great sweep of history – but I find pleasure in the thought that the New Farm community today provides a vivid illustration of that ancient thesis – drawing on the resources within itself, to build a stronger society that values its history and understands its relevance for future generations.

I hope you may also enjoy that thought, as I wish all who purchase it, every enjoyment of this interesting book and it is now, with much pleasure, that I declare “*Homes with History on the New Farm Peninsula*” by Gerard Benjamin, to be officially launched. Thank you.