



OUR GLORIOUS

Jewel of Jewels

~ sitting grandly
in the crown of
laneways and
arcades

By JOCELYN PRIDE

Wandering through the L shaped arcadè linking Collins Street with Elizabeth, you can be forgiven for expecting to see gentlemen tipping their hats or ladies swishing past in silk gowns. This is a place for elegance, and will always be one of Melbourne's best kept treasures.

Still visible, the bluestone foundations are a reminder of the rich history of this remarkable building.

Purchased in 1837 at one of Melbourne's earliest auctions by William Briscoe & Son for the princely sum of eighteen pounds, the site was transformed into Briscoe's Bulk Grain Store. Considered a magnificent construction of its time, in 1883 it was sold to a name that was to become synonymous with Melbourne – the George Brothers. This was the first Georges Store in Melbourne, an exclusive emporium that catered to high society, albeit short-lived.

A spectacular fire swept through the Block Arcade building in 1889 causing a damage bill estimated at two hundred thousand pounds. After the fire, Georges Emporium relocated up the hill to the 'Paris' end of Collins Street and the site, modelled on Galleria Vittoria in Milan, became a shopping arcade. A phrase coined by author Fergus Hume in his book *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* published in 1886 gave the arcade its name: 'It was Saturday morning and fashionable Melbourne was 'doing the block'. Collins Street is to the Southern city what Bond Street and



the Row are to London, and the Boulevards to Paris...'

Subsequently the Block Arcade was born, destined to become a Melbourne icon.

In 1988 the \$14.5 million dollar refurbishment saw the restoration of the original colour scheme, light fittings and general structure of the building. With the inclusion of Block Court, a slightly later addition to the overall arcade in the 1930's, in one location you can see elements of Italian, French Renaissance, Victorian and Art Deco architecture. At the heart of the arcade's splendor is the unique mosaic tiled floor, a classical Victorian design created from tiles manufactured in Italy. Considered of such significance, during World War II the floor was protected from heavy military footwear by a layer of felt carpet.

When I visit the Arcade, childhood memories come flooding back — holding tightly to my mother's hand, peering longingly in the shop windows, playing 'don't step on the cracks' of the mosaic floor, and giving my treasured doll to Ada to 'make better' in the famous Dafel toy shop's hospital. I remember a tall blonde customer bending down to ask me what was wrong with my doll. I gazed up at her trying to work out if she were



a princess or an angel? Afternoon tea at the Hopetoun Tea Rooms was always the highlight of an outing. It's where I tasted my first blue heaven milkshake complete with a bright red jelly cake with lashings of real cream that I ate with more gusto than elegance.

The Hopetoun Tea Rooms is the only original shop still in the arcade today. Opened in 1892 and named after Lady Hopetoun, founder of the Victorian Ladies Work Association, this Melbourne institution has seen people from all over the world and all walks of life grace its beautifully-laid tables. The appetizing window of 'cakes personified' forms a mouth watering backdrop for patrons patiently queuing for a table. The wait is definitely worth it, tucking into traditional and contemporary favourites for breakfast, morning tea, and lunch or afternoon tea. Even the act of selecting a tea is a luxurious affair with the menu sounding more like a travel brochure than a café - exotic names like, Fiji, Congo Bongo and Dahl House to name a few. High tea is a grand, traditional event and needs to be pre-booked. Complete with a three tiered stand stacked with ribbon sandwiches, miniature quiches, petit fours, fresh fruit and scones the two hour experience is one to be savoured.

Tours of the Block Arcade depart from the Hopetoun Tea Rooms every Tuesday and Thursday at 1pm. Limited to twenty guests, the two hour intimate tour is not only the fascinating history of the arcade and the eclectic retailers, but an insight into what lies above. The four floors of offices are extravagantly decorated with leadlight windows, dados and friezes that are colour coordinated and meticulously maintained in accordance with the National Trust. There is even an original turn of the 20th century telephone box that was the Victorian era's equivalent to the modern day smart phone.

Hundreds of people take up the free offer of the 45 minute tour as part of the Melbourne Open House program, to be held on the weekend of 28th July between 10am and 4pm. There are also plans afoot for major celebrations for the arcade's 120th anniversary in the latter part of this year. Don Parsons the Centre Manager says, "There will be something for everyone to celebrate this significant event in the history of Melbourne."

If you prefer to browse at your own pace, the proud shop owners are keen to share the treasures that lie within their walls, not to mention the ceilings.

Chelsea Fashion was formerly the first Singer Sewing Machine shop in Australia and houses a magnificent mural painted by scenic artist Phillip Goatcher while opposite, the first Kodak shop in Australia, now Wittner shoes, still has the original pressed metal ceiling. Polished wood frames the plate glass window displays of the specialty shops throughout the arcade, several of which have been there for over thirty years. I love the famous teddy bears of Dafe's, the eye catching works of art in Australian by Design, the nostalgic Van der Toorren photographic studio, the precious gems created in the French Jewel Box and of course the delicious chocolates of Haighs.

Whether you're a local or a visitor to Melbourne, 'doing the block' is a must do.

At a glance:

theblockarcade.com.au/

