

George Isaac Porter: across two worlds

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2014 marks the 175th anniversary of one of Melbourne's enduring cultural elements, the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, forerunner of the Melbourne Athenaeum Library. The life of one of the Institution's founders, George Porter, reflects the spirit of entrepreneurship abounding in Melbourne before the gold rush. Porter's early career was as a gunner with the British East India Company's army in India. Later in Penang, he managed the Botanic Gardens, was schoolmaster, parish clerk, and successful merchant. In 1835 he moved to Sydney, then in 1839 to Melbourne where he became involved in the major issues of the day.

Early days with the East India Company

George Isaac Porter was born on 16 March 1800, in Beddington, Surrey, England, the second of five children of George James Porter and Elizabeth, née Alfrey. At sixteen he joined the British East India Company (EIC) army and was posted to India in 1817 as a gunner.¹ He married early, being just nineteen when on 14 June 1819 he wed Esther Little Bryden, aged about sixteen, in Dum Dum, Calcutta (Kolkata). Esther was born about 1804 in London, England. The young couple soon started a family, producing seven children between 1820 and 1831. All survived to adulthood except the firstborn, Esther, who died aged six in Penang in 1827, by which time two sons and a second daughter had been born, to be followed by a son and two more daughters.

Shortly after Porter's marriage, botanist Nathaniel Wallich, superintendent of the Calcutta Botanic Gardens, required the assistance of an overseer who would also teach and train young apprentice gardeners. He asked for Porter who was released from his army duties as a result.²

Three years later Porter's career took an interesting turn when he accompanied Wallich to Penang (Malaysia) in 1822, where they established a small botanic garden and Porter was appointed superintendent.³

Porter named his eldest son George Wallich suggesting a close personal relationship with Dr Wallich. Specimens collected in Penang by Porter were later sent by Wallich to various herbariums around the world, including Kew Gardens. As evidence of a mutual respect between the two men Wallich named two plant species after Porter. Although Porter resigned as superintendent of the Penang Botanic Gardens in 1824, his botanical experience meant that he would no doubt have still been consulted. His knowledge would later be put to good use in Australia.

Porter's arrival in Penang was also fortuitous in that the previous schoolmaster of the Penang Free School had resigned and the local Company administrators were seeking a replacement. On the strength of Porter's experience of teaching apprentices, Wallich recommended him for the post. It was ostensibly temporary and Wallich fully expected Porter to return to the Calcutta gardens at some point. He never did.⁴

Attached to the position of schoolmaster was that of parish clerk at St George's Church, a role Porter would continue to hold until around 1830, establishing what would become a lifelong involvement with the Church of England.

Porter resigned his role as headmaster in 1826, but retained that of parish clerk when he began his mercantile career, teaming up with John Revely under the firm Revely & Co. In early 1827 the partnership with Revely was amicably dissolved and Porter, then twenty-seven, continued on his own.⁵

Much of his business was as an agent and auctioneer, dealing primarily with goods being imported on visiting EIC ships and the sale of local houses, land and miscellaneous goods. Porter was beginning to lay down solid foundations for his future business interests in Australia.

Venturing south: Sydney and the Port Phillip District

In early 1834, having made his fortune, Porter decided to chance his arm in Australia, but not before returning briefly to England. The family, without the two eldest sons who had previously been sent to England for schooling, departed Penang. Arriving in Calcutta in February, they had time to visit old friends and acquaintances prior to boarding the *Hindustan* for Britain, arriving at Deal in August.⁶

An article in the 1834 edition of the East India Company's *Gardener's Magazine* describes advice given by Porter 'recently returned from Penang, to the Marchioness of Hastings, the wife of the Governor, regarding her Conservatory in Calcutta. ... Mr Porter when attached to the current Calcutta Botanic Garden, prepared many specimens of plants for the herbarium of that establishment, and subsequently, as Dr Wallich informs us in a letter dated 24 March 1834, sent home vast collections of growing and preserved plants from the rich island.'⁷

Changed trading conditions may well have prompted Porter to move to Australia, the commercial potential of which would have been widely known in mercantile circles. By 1813 the EIC had lost its trade monopoly in India, and following abolition of its China-trade

monopoly twenty years later, existed only as a government agency. Added to this, the abolition in 1830 of Penang's status as the fourth presidency of India (the fourth most important settlement of the EIC's Indian territories) sent the economy into recession. George and Esther may have considered that their children's future prospects would be brighter in the NSW Colony. It is also possible that periodic recurrences of a fever initially suffered by Porter in 1822 were malarial, perhaps contracted during travels to collect botanical specimens. While it is not known if his illness had persisted it may have been a factor in the decision to settle in Sydney where the cooler climate was thought to be beneficial. Indeed, in 1822 Wallich had appealed on behalf of: 'George Porter, the head overseer of this garden, whose state of health ... is such, as to make a voyage to sea very necessary to save his life'.⁸

A return to England before setting out for Sydney may have been prompted by a need to visit family connections and perhaps to deal with family business, as well as enabling the two eldest boys to re-join the family. Porter took the opportunity to purchase merchandise for setting up business in Australia, knowing that the population growth there had led to an increased demand for goods. The Penang newspapers often carried articles on Australia, generally copied from British or Indian newspapers.



Artist Richard Read Jnr, 'George Isaac Porter' 1836

©Marcus Langdon

Porter was thirty-five when he brought his wife and six children to Australia, arriving on 31 August 1835 aboard the *Alexander* captained by Walter Ramsay. 'He brought with him a large quantity of merchandise which he used to establish himself as a merchant.' This cargo was offered for sale just days later when Porter advertised his goods: 'The undersigned

commenced in business as merchant and general agents from this date. George Porter & Co. September 1, 1835.⁹

Porter's Sydney business in Castlereagh Street thrived and typical of the major merchants advertising at the time he imported a range of goods. The Sydney press for example reported 8 chests of cigars, and 61 casks of vinegar, arriving in July 1836 for George Porter and Company, on the ships *Vestal* and *Mary* respectively.¹⁰

Branching out, Porter's company purchased the barque *Regia* for £2600.¹¹ The ship was laid on for a coasting trip to Port Phillip, Kangaroo Island, King George's Sound, and the Swan River, under the command of Captain R. Thompkins. 'As the greater part of her freight is engaged she will meet with quick despatch.'¹² In July the same year Porter purchased the 227-ton brig *Alice* for £2400 and despatched her to Mauritius under Captain Richardson. The vessel returned from that voyage in December 1838 'laden with wine'.¹³

The new settlement of Melbourne beckons

News of the rapid development of the Port Phillip District would have been known to Porter, the first settlement of Melbourne having occurred in 1835, the year he arrived in Sydney. With new fields to conquer Porter, accompanied by his family and five servants, arrived in Melbourne on 29 September 1839, travelling on the maiden voyage of the 204-ton brig *Jewess*, under Captain Delanoy.¹⁴ The servants, William Chappell, John Hawkes, John Monis, John Thorpe, and Patrick Vissard, had all been drawn from the convict ship *Earl Grey* which had arrived in Sydney in 1837.¹⁵

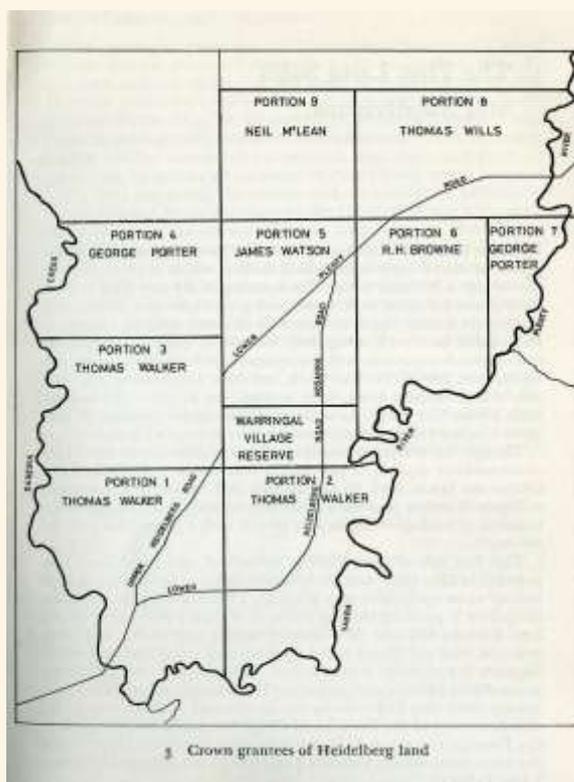
Two days later Charles Joseph La Trobe arrived to assume his new role as Superintendent of Port Phillip, and Porter was one of 236 settlers to sign a welcome address.¹⁶

Penang had been settled by the East India Company in 1786, just two years before Australia and nearly fifty years before Melbourne. Porter no doubt saw the opportunity from this perspective, both Penang and Melbourne being run along British lines, and he was able to apply his experience in trade and town matters, consolidated by his time in Sydney.

Porter was an astute land purchaser, as seen in his investment in the Port Phillip District prior to his arrival in Melbourne:

The demand for land by the settlers of Port Phillip forced the government to open land close to the settlement of Melbourne. In the N.S.W. Government Gazette of 13 May 1838 an advertisement stated that certain lands in Port Phillip, in the parish of Keelbundoora, would be put to auction on 12 September 1838. ... It is interesting to note that all portions sold were those with a good water supply, whilst the other portions which lacked this

commodity were sold at a later date.¹⁷



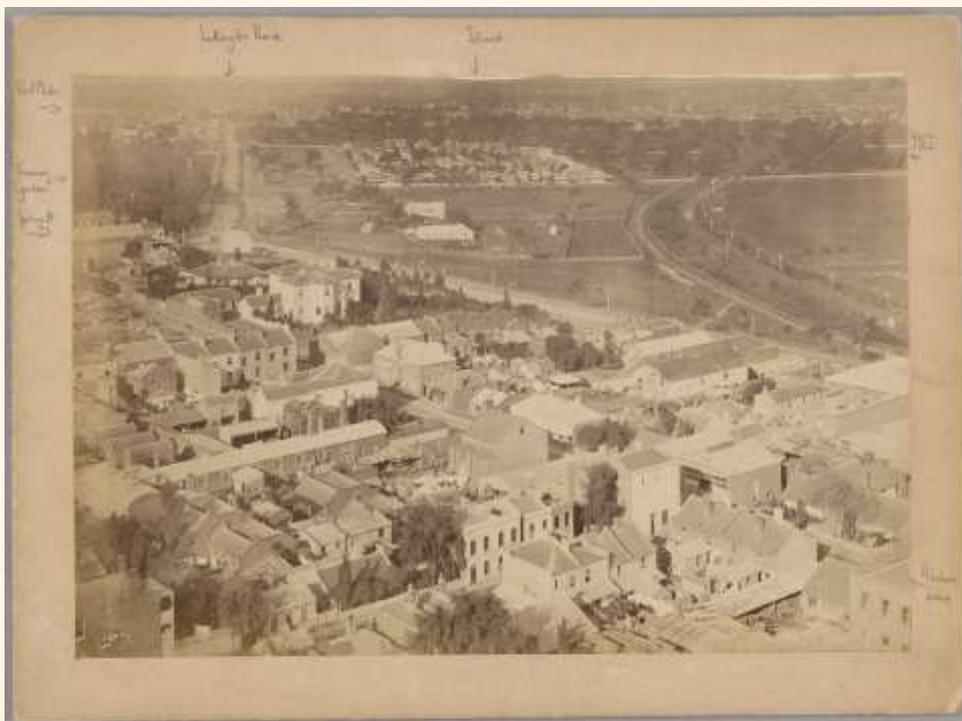
George Porter's Heidelberg Portions 4 and 7 of Heidelberg Crown Grants. in Garden, D.S. Heidelberg: the land and its people, 1838-1900, Melbourne University Press, 1972, opp. p. 6.

This was in Heidelberg to the north of Melbourne, and Porter had purchased Portions 4 (830 acres costing £616) and 7 (780 acres at £1521) prior to leaving Sydney. Property values rose rapidly and most of the Heidelberg Portions were subdivided and sold. It is interesting that of the original purchasers only Porter retained ownership, apparently intending to develop his agricultural interests and build a house. A conservation study commissioned by the Heidelberg City Council in 1985 contains maps reconstructing land holdings of Porter and other settlers in the Heidelberg area at successive stages. From 1838 to the early twentieth century the family had continuous ownership of Portions 4 (Claremont) and 7 (Cleveland).¹⁸

Further extensive purchases were made in the Port Phillip District, some prior to leaving Sydney, involving land in the centre of Melbourne, and in Geelong, a fast-developing town in the District. From February 1839 Porter purchased ten prime lots in Melbourne Town, adding two lots the following year. These purchases exceeded £1500.¹⁹

Initially the family was living in Lonsdale Street, probably in rented premises. Advertisements placed by Porter in December that year for tenders to construct 'two-story

Houses, to be built in Flinders-street' tell us that he was actively involved in building activities on his Melbourne properties including Cleveland House in Flinders Street, to house his large family.



'[Looking south-east from the spire of Scots Church, showing Flinders St., Wellington Parade and Jolimont]'. George Porter's Cleveland House is on the far side of the large two-storied white house with a garden fronting Flinders St., near the corner of Exhibition St. (top left). Paterson Bros Photographers, 1875. State Library of Victoria H8007 file b47464

[Notes on frame from top right to bottom left: Jolimont, Wellington Parade, East Melbourne, Treasury Gardens, Spring St.]

Donald Garden, in his 1972 publication *Heidelberg: the land and its people, 1838-1900*, comments that Porter showed a marked propensity for the name 'Cleveland', and gave it to at least three of his properties. These were: Cleveland Estate in Heidelberg; his residence in Flinders Street, Cleveland House, later part of the *Herald & Weekly Times* site; and some terrace houses, Cleveland Terrace, currently the site of Her Majesty's Theatre on the corner of Exhibition and Little Bourke Streets.²⁰

Edmund Finn, in his account of early Melbourne, written in the 1880s, comments that: 'Old Melbourne could boast of (so-called) "Terraces" ... The first erected in Stephen Street [now Exhibition Street] commenced at the corner of Little Bourke Street, and known as "Cleveland Terrace", but was afterwards known as "Porter's Cottages", after their owner Mr George Porter. If the memoirs of "Porter's Cottages" could be written, many a quaint and thrilling tale of Melbourne life would they unfold.'²¹

In Melbourne, Porter's twelve lots were in an area bounded by Russell, Lonsdale, Spring and Flinders Streets. The site where Melbourne's Her Majesty's Theatre now stands had been purchased by Porter in 1839 for £100. Little development occurred until the gold rush boom years of the late 1850s, when the site was fully occupied by merchants and offices. By about 1880 the Hippodrome, known mainly for equestrian shows and circuses, had replaced Cleveland Terrace. In 1884 property developer Jules Joubert secured a 30-year lease on the site from the then owner, George Edward Porter, a grandson of George Porter. Joubert built what was at the time the largest theatre in the Southern Hemisphere, the Alexandra, named after the Princess of Wales, costing £40,000, the theatre opening in 1886. Joubert sub-let the theatre, but appears to have relinquished the lease by 1900 when it re-opened as Her Majesty's Theatre under a new lessee, J.C. Williamson. Fifteen years later Williamson purchased the property from the Porter family for £35,000. A far cry from George Porter's initial vacant £100 site.²²

The depression of the early 1840s was severe, affecting many Port Phillip landowners. Mortgaging by Porter during these years probably included borrowing to build the various houses in town. On 17 January 1840 Porter had mortgaged Portion 7 (Cleveland Estate) in Heidelberg to his Heidelberg neighbour, Richard Henry Browne, for £2500, the mortgage being re-paid on 21 November 1843.²³ Porter mortgaged his Lots in Flinders Lane (2, 3 and 4, Cleveland House), Lot 10 (Cleveland Terrace), and Portion 4 (Claremont) in Heidelberg to the Australian Trust Company against a loan of £2500 on 10 April 1843.²⁴ This mortgage was paid out by George's widow, Esther, on 31 January 1849, six months after Porter's death.

In spite of these difficult times Porter continued to develop his Heidelberg property, concentrating on Portion 7 which had frontages on the Plenty and Yarra Rivers. In January 1841 he claimed to have spent over £2000 on improvements.²⁵ It is likely that with his knowledge of plant taxonomy and awareness of appropriate growing conditions developed during his years in the East he would have been closely involved in an early agricultural society initiated by Heidelberg landowners who imported a variety of animals and crops.

An 1841 New South Wales Census of Porter's property in Heidelberg lists nine persons, with John Tailor in charge, six of whom were 'Free'. The property was 'completed' and built of wood and stone. This substantial workforce indicates the extent of Porter's agricultural activities a mere sixteen months after his arrival in Melbourne.²⁶

But not all went smoothly for Porter on his Heidelberg estate. In 1840, the Melbourne Survey Office surveyed a line for a local section of road resulting in Porter's Portion 7 being left without reasonable access. The original Survey Office map shows the new line of the road

through Warringal (Heidelberg) to the parish of Nillumbik.²⁷

Porter was alerted to this after reading an item in the New South Wales *Government Gazette* and wrote to Superintendent La Trobe to complain about the inconvenience to him and his neighbours (see Appendix for transcription of letter). Eventually Porter withdrew his complaint as he believed that lengthy correspondence with Sydney would cause further delay. He was prepared to accept the inconvenience of the proposed section to facilitate the speedy opening of a usable road. The new road opened by May 1841 was not satisfactory and a Road Trust was elected on 20 October 1841. George Porter, Thomas Wills and William Verner were elected trustees, and Porter served until 1845. This was the first example of local government in the Port Phillip District.²⁸ The Road Trust relied on public donations and subscriptions to finance improvements to the road, but by 1845 its condition had deteriorated. In 1847 a toll was authorised to finance the road; again a Port Phillip District first.²⁹

Meanwhile Porter's agricultural know-how together with the rich river-flat soils of Heidelberg were paying dividends and by 1842 it could be reported that:

Mr George Porter, who is a cultivator to a considerable extent, has had a return sales account from Sydney of an invoice of potatoes sent to that market for disposal, of which it appears that the Port Phillip potatoes realised three pounds per ton more than the produce of any other soil. Mr Porter is one of the Commissioners of Markets for Melbourne, and has done much to advance the character of the district, by his personal applications to the pursuit of agriculture.³⁰

By the middle of 1842 moves were well under way to hold Municipal Council elections, which would result in Council assuming control of the markets. Political posturing began in earnest and Porter and others ran foul of John Pascoe Fawkner, a fellow market commissioner, who in the *Patriot* implied that Porter had fraudulently evaded the payment of market dues by employing the market inspector to sell his potatoes.³¹

A meeting of the Market Commissioners was hurriedly called, Fawkner's allegations refuted, and he was expelled from the organisation by the other commissioners. An editorial in the *Port Phillip Gazette* commented that: 'it was necessary ... to relieve Mr Commissioner Porter of the false and scandalous charges of which the Patriot had been made the vehicle ...'³²

Porter advertised in August 1842: 'Eastern Bazaar: Opposite the Scottish Hotel, Great Bourke-st. One wing of this Bazaar being complete, parties desirous of availing themselves of the opportunity of renting a shop or stand are informed that there are now three stands to

let, Nos. 2, 3, and 5, two of which are neatly fitted.’³³

It appears that he owned the stalls and later utilised one of them to sell produce from his Heidelberg farm, as in the following February this advertisement appeared: ‘To be Let: Four Dwelling Houses, in Cleveland Terrace at the corner of Stephen and Little Collins-Streets, and two shops in the Eastern Bazaar; all at very low rates. Apply to Michael Roche, Cleveland Farm store, opposite the Scottish Arms, Bourke-street East.’

Alongside this was another advertisement offering sections of Portions 4 and 7 in Heidelberg for lease. As some of these holdings were mortgaged to a neighbour, this may have been on a fairly informal basis, enabling Porter to lease out sections:

‘To be Let on Lease: Several beautiful and well watered Farms, on the Yarra and Plenty Rivers [Portion 7], combining all the advantages of rich alluvial soil, pure water, delightful scenery and proximity to town.

Also: Several excellent Farms on the Eastern side of the Darebin Creek [Portion 4], only six miles from town, of sizes varying from 35 to 100 acres, or more if required.

For particulars apply, in town, to George Porter Esq., or on the Cleveland Estate to the overseer, James H Wardel.’³⁴

Porter’s extensive community concerns

Porter’s involvement with the emerging society shows that his commercial success appeared not to override his sense of responsibility to the various communities he encountered - charity, church and educational.

In November 1839, less than two months after settling in Melbourne, Porter was elected as one of the eight founding vice-presidents of the Melbourne Mechanics’ Institution. This suggests that shortly after his arrival in Melbourne he familiarised himself with the social scene and soon cultivated influential contacts. The establishment of a mechanics’ institution at such an early stage in Melbourne’s development was the result of an initiative of the master builders who called a meeting to discuss the need to support the workers in times of stress, also to improve their skills and hence expand the labour pool.³⁵ Men of influence, such as Porter, would have supported these objectives, not without self-interest, as skilled labour was in short supply.

In August 1840 Porter was involved in a proposal for a Port Phillip College, possibly prompted by his earlier experience as schoolmaster of the Penang Free School. At a meeting held on 12 August 1840, he was appointed to a provisional committee ‘to retain office until £2000 had been raised’. But the Catholic Church saw the initiative as ‘the first step towards the establishment of a Church of England ascendancy’. Finn comments that ‘the Collegiate

prospectus fluttered for a season before the public eye, and the proprietary vanished'.³⁶

Finn lists both G. Porter (father), and J.A. Porter and G.W. Porter (his sons, who would have been in late teenage) in attendance at a levee in honour of Governor Gipps in October 1841. 150 gentlemen, the social elite of Melbourne Town, were presented to the Governor.³⁷

A little over a year after this gathering many of these men would have welcomed the opening of the grand new Mechanics' Institution building in Collins Street, on the site now occupied by its successor the Melbourne Athenaeum, adjacent to the Town Hall. This supplied a conveniently located 'club' for gentlemen to mingle, make valuable contacts, and scan imported newspapers for news from 'home'. It also offered the only substantial venue for large gatherings in Melbourne, even housing the first Town Council until the Town Hall was built. Porter's sons George Wallich Porter and John Alfrey Porter show up in the Institution's membership lists from time to time from the early 1850s, when it was Melbourne's only substantial library, pending the opening in 1856 of the first stage of Melbourne's free public library, forerunner of the State Library of Victoria.

Porter maintained his interest in botanic gardens. The *Patriot* declared in early 1842: 'Our readers, more especially the ladies, will be glad to learn that His Excellency Sir George Gipps has given directions that the formation of a Botanic Garden, at Melbourne, shall be immediately proceeded with, and that fifteen acres at Batman's Hill be set apart for that purpose, Messrs. Porter, Simpson, and a number of gentlemen to be named are to form a committee for the purpose of superintending the progress of the work on which the unemployed emigrants are to be engaged ...'.³⁸ It is likely that George Porter was the Porter thus named in view of his previous experience overseeing botanical gardens. It wasn't until December 1845 that the location of the Botanic Garden - its present site - was determined. The Batman's Hill proposal had been subject to financial and political problems, including objections from Sydney to paying for Melbourne 'to have a pleasure spot', their own Gardens having been planted for food for the convicts and supervising troops.³⁹ Neither was Hobart pleased, complaining that the Governor 'would only allow the poor Vandemonians twenty-five acres! and even in that we dare not put a spade till the College is built, and the two bridges across the Derwent erected'.⁴⁰

There was an urgent need to establish a hospital in Melbourne to assist those who could not afford to pay for private doctors. At a meeting of subscribers to the proposed Melbourne hospital in April 1842 Porter was one of twenty-five committee members appointed for a period of nine months to oversee progress.⁴¹

A staunch and influential Anglican, Porter was involved in the establishment of two major

churches in Melbourne: St James, then on the corner of William and Little Collins Streets, but dismantled and moved to King Street in 1913, and St Peter's in Gisborne Street, still on its original site at the northeast margin of today's Victorian State Parliament gardens.



*Artist J.E. Butler, An early impression of St James Old Cathedral, Melbourne, 1858.
State Library of Victoria, La Trobe Picture Collection, H5341.*

Porter was elected to the early committee of St James which was designed by Robert Russell, Melbourne's first surveyor. It had been preceded on the site by a small pioneer church of weatherboard opened in early 1837 which saw the first marriage and first baptism in the Port Phillip District. The foundation stone of the new church was laid by Superintendent La Trobe on 9 November 1839, three days before he became patron, Porter a vice-president, and Russell a committee member, of the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution. In 1840 Porter was elected to the building committee of St James.⁴²

The population growth in Melbourne meant that soon another church was needed. Porter was one of a list of thirty subscribers of £5 each when fundraising for St Peter's began in May 1841. He was one of sixteen of the main proponents calling for a meeting to elect trustees, 'the sum of £300 having been subscribed'.⁴³

This meeting was held on 23 June when Porter, seconded by George Arden, the young editor of the *Port Phillip Gazette*, moved that: 'from the large proportion of the Protestant Episcopalian persuasion unaccommodated ... it had become a serious duty to ... erect another church'. Porter proposed two further motions, so was certainly at the forefront of the push for the new church.⁴⁴

The application was submitted to the Government in Sydney but with some funds short, a

decision on St Peter's was deferred until the roof of St James was completed. A meeting was held in November 1843 to revive the project and Porter was elected as one of twelve to form a committee to raise further funds and boost subscriptions from the £275 still held in a bank account to £400.⁴⁵

The tough economic conditions of the early 1840s meant that it was not until the end of 1845 that a total of £500 was raised from the public. Bishop Broughton then donated £500 from Sydney funds and the Government added a further £1000. The application was resubmitted, a site granted, and the foundation stone was laid by La Trobe on 18 June 1846.⁴⁶

The first part of St Peter's was completed only a few months before George Porter died at the relatively young age of forty-eight on 7 July 1848, when his older children were still in their twenties and the youngest seventeen.

Porter's funeral service was held on 11 July at St James Cathedral,⁴⁷ and his burial service conducted by Rev. A.C. Thomson.⁴⁸ He was first buried in the Old Melbourne Cemetery, but in 1883 when the site was required for the Victoria Market, his remains were moved to Boroondara Cemetery in Kew, Victoria, where a memorial can still be seen. Porter pre-deceased the six children who travelled to Australia, but only the eldest son and the two youngest daughters outlived their mother Esther.



*The Porter family memorial in Boroondarah Cemetery, Kew, Victoria.
Photograph: Marcus Langdon*

After their father's death his sons' occupation of the Heidelberg property Cleveland: 'had always been brief and spasmodic and, apart from a brief period of residence by John Porter in the early 1860s, the sons lived in Melbourne'.⁴⁹

George Porter would have been sad to read a description of Cleveland in Heidelberg in the early 20th century: 'Cleveland became a good example of the danger of absentee ownership. The property got into a filthy state with noxious weeds growing everywhere and the farmhouses and fencing were in a very derelict state'.⁵⁰

What did the future hold for the Porter children?

When George and Esther brought their young family to Australia they would have been seeking good career prospects for the boys, the eldest then aged 13, and good marriage alliances for their three young daughters, a matter of importance at the time both for social and business connections.



*Photographer T.F. Chuck. 'G.W. Porter' No. 593 of 1872 mosaic
The explorers and early colonists of Victoria State Library of Victoria, H5056/593.*

George Wallich Porter (1822-1906), the eldest son, was employed as a clerk with the Bank of Australasia, the first bank to be established in Melbourne, set up in 1838 by David Charteris McArthur. McArthur, an auditor on the 1839 Melbourne Mechanics' Institution, was a close associate and neighbour of the Porter family in Heidelberg, his own story being one of rising above impoverished circumstances to achieve the status of 'gentleman', and prominence among the social set of Melbourne. No doubt he would have been a source of helpful advice to the family following Porter's death and an important family connection.⁵¹

George Wallich Porter was married on 24 April 1861 at St Peter's Church, Melbourne, to Sarah, née Broomfield, with whom he had two sons and one daughter. George built on his family inheritance of considerable property much of which he had sub-divided. He returned to Britain with his young family in 1877. Following the death of his younger brother John in

Melbourne in 1882, certain property was passed to him by John's Will, but he disclaimed this inheritance and it reverted to John's widow, Ellen. George returned to Australia at least twice during the 1880s to deal with property. He died in Bournemouth, England, in 1906. At his death the estate in Australia amounted to £25,138,⁵² and that in England to just £1,676.



*Photographer T.F.Chuck. 'J.A. Porter' No. 607 of 1872 mosaic
The explorers and early colonists of Victoria State Library of Victoria, H5056/607.*

The second son, John Alfrey Porter (1824-1882), became clerk of the Supreme Court in 1841. Two years later he became a solicitor and in 1853 was appointed prothonotary of the Supreme Court, a position he held up until his death. He married Ellen Cussen in 1851, the marriage producing two sons and a daughter. He had married well: 'John built on the wealth and property left by his father, and from a substantial estate inherited by his wife, Ellen Cussen, daughter of one of Melbourne's first medical superintendents, Dr Patrick Cussen, enabling him to leave substantial estate to his son, George Edward Porter. The wealth built in these early years was invested in trust for future generations, one of the beneficiaries being John Villiers (great great grandson of George Isaac Porter), assisting him in accumulating the capital which now forms the basis of the *John Villiers Trust*', a philanthropic trust for public charitable institutions working in the State of Queensland.⁵³ At the time of his death in September 1882 John Alfrey Porter was an extremely wealthy man, leaving an estate worth £163,064, a fortune in those days.

The unmarried third son, William Edward, and the eldest daughter, Elizabeth Charlotte (m. Ephraim Howe, 1844; d.1860), died at twenty-nine and thirty-three respectively of tuberculosis, Elizabeth leaving three young children. The two younger daughters, Mary Ann (unmarried, d. 1891), and Flora Adelaide (m. Dr James Robertson, 1856; d. 1914), had no

children.

George and Esther's legacy

Porter and his contemporaries typified the gentlemen and master builders who were responsible for the establishment of many of Melbourne's institutions. Fuelled by their energy and enthusiasm to take advantage of the commercial, agricultural, and cultural opportunities, they played a major role in Port Phillip's move towards separation from New South Wales as the new Colony of Victoria. This was aided by the District's distance from the administrative centre in Sydney, governance being slow to catch up with the entrepreneurial activities of the pre-gold rush settlers.

Richard Read's 1836 portrait of Porter, painted a year after his arrival in Sydney, shows a genial and contented man, in spite of reported health problems. And why wouldn't he look pleased with life? At the time he was a successful merchant, a man of considerable wealth and status, and had able sons to follow in his path. Later he would stamp his authority in Melbourne as a prominent property owner and agriculturalist; he was a man of political clout, wide interests, and a life-long dedication to the Anglican Church.

As with most women of the era who worked behind the scenes to support their menfolk and families, little is known of Esther Porter. Her life was one of constant child-bearing from the age of seventeen, moving with her young husband towards increasing wealth and status. She was resilient, outliving George and four of her seven offspring. In 1853 Esther moved to Sydney where her son William and her two daughters had previously relocated, selling up her Cleveland House furniture,⁵⁴ but was back in Melbourne again after that, showing up in directories until about 1870. Both daughters were living with her in Torquay, England, when she died in her eighties in 1887. Esther left an estate in Australia of just under £24,000.

Unlike many contemporaries whose fortunes failed in the young settlement Porter's legacy endured, his accumulated wealth providing a springboard for his children and their descendants. George Porter also proved his social worth, playing an active and productive role in the growing settlement – a true Port Phillip pioneer.

But we should not forget the roles he played during the formative years of George Town, Penang. In a settlement where Europeans were but a very small minority he held positions of importance and influence while still in his twenties and early thirties. The business skills he honed there in the difficult and competitive world of mercantile trade set him, his family, and subsequent generations on a course of prosperity in Australia. George Porter left a legacy which indeed stretched across two worlds.

Appendix

His Honor

Chas. Josh. La Trobe Esq.

Superintendent of Port Phillip

I respectfully beg leave to bring to your notice and that of the Government the very great inconvenience I at present suffer from the want of a Road to my Section No.7 of 780 Acres in the County of Bourke Parish of Keelbundoora as purchased by me at the Govt. Sales of Land on the 12th September 1838 and of which I am the present Proprietor having expended upwards of £2,000 in improvements thereon beyond the Original purchase Money of £1482 paid to Government for it.

I am aware that your Honor was pleased to order a Line of Road to be marked out through the village of Warringal to the Village Reserve beyond the Plenty or Yarra Rivulet which, instead of following the Original track or line on the Government Maps as laid down by Mr. Hoddle (and the road always in use by myself and neighbouring proprietors) has led it completely away from my Section, leaving me now no approach or Road whatever, so that I have positively no access, being entirely surrounded by Fences, made, as I am informed, agreeable to the proposed new line of Road under the Sanction of the Government.

On remonstrating with the Survey Department here, I was told that a private, or, as it is termed, an Occupation Road, leading from the Main Road, would be reserved for my Section, and have since been informed, that a narrow track of fifty Links is to be opened along the Section line at the upper or Northern end of Section No.6 which track or Occupation Road I beg leave to protest against on the following grounds.

It leads me upwards of two Miles out of my way from Melbourne through an almost impracticable track which is not warranted by any line of Road hitherto used or marked off upon the Government Maps.

It will do away with the Original Road from the Village of Warringal through Section 6 to my Section No.7 which is the best and most practicable.

It is opposed by and injurious to several Landholders in the adjoining Section No.6 in putting them to great expence and inconvenience in removing their present line of Fence and also leading them a Mile or two round for which there is no necessity.

It is also opposed by and seriously injurious to Mr Hall, the Proprietor of Section 8 adjoining; who would have to run up a New line of Fence along the Occupation Road and two other lines of Fence along the Main or Village Road alluded to; both of which Roads run through his Section and materially cut up his Land.

It would leave no line of Road to the Section adjoining mine to the Eastward (between No.7 and the Yarra Yarra River) and which was advertised for Sale in December last but withdrawn. Fifty Links are too narrow for the purposes required in this part of the Country.

I most respectfully solicit the early notice of your Honor to these particulars as I am now suffering from the want of a Road to bring my Produce into Town and request that the Original or some Road may be opened by authority.

I also beg to state that I have lately seen an advertisement or Notice in the Sydney Govt. Gazette (published in November or December last) respecting this line of Road and calling upon parties to make their objections (if any) to the Survey Department of Sydney before 25th Decr. 1840. This, in my case, would have been impracticable as I did not see the Notice prior to that period, and then by mere accident; and your Honor is aware that it has not been published here, the Sydney Govt. Gazette being forwarded to none but Government Officers and the Justices of Peace for the Territory.

I am,

Sir,

Your most obedient Servant

Geo. Porter

Melbourne, Port Phillip

12th January 1841

A note, initialled by La Trobe, is inscribed on one of the pages:- “handed to the Surveyor for some explanation. 15th Jan 1841”. On the back of the last page the Assistant Surveyor in Charge (T S Townsend, who had created the new survey line) replies, denying the problems existed. (Superintendent’s Correspondence, Letters Received, VPRS 19/P, Unit 15, File 41/761).

Notes:

¹ British Library, IOR/L/MIL/10/29 & L/MIL/10/142.

² British Library, IOR/F/4/621/15534.

³ Straits Settlements Records (SSR), Reel 2742, I23 Penang: Miscellaneous Letters (Out).

⁴ SSR, Reel 3222, A16, Penang Consultations, 12 September 1822.

⁵ *Prince of Wales Island Gazette*, Penang, 24 February 1827, Vol. 13, No. 8.

⁶ *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British and Foreign India, China, and Australasia*, Vol. XV, September-December, London: Wm. H. Allen & Co, 1834.

⁷ John C. Loudon, (ed.) *East India Company Gardener’s Magazine* London, 1834.

⁸ R. Hanitsch, *Letters of Nathaniel Wallich relating to the establishment of Botanical Gardens in Singapore*, Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JSBRAS), No. 65, 1913, pp. 40-41.

Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839

George Isaac Porter

Melbourne Athenaeum Inc. history website: <http://www.mahistory.org.au>

- ⁹ *Australian* Sydney, 4 September 1835.
- ¹⁰ *Sydney Colonist* 7 July 1836.
- ¹¹ *Sydney Colonist* 23 February 1837.
- ¹² *Sydney Herald* 23 February 1837.
- ¹³ *Australian* Sydney 18 December 1838.
- ¹⁴ *Port Phillip Gazette* 2 October 1839.
- ¹⁵ VPRS 2149, Register of Convicts, Assigned Servants 1842-1854.
- ¹⁶ *Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser* 7 October 1839.
- ¹⁷ Cyril Cummins (ed.), *A Pictorial History of Heidelberg Since 1836*, Heidelberg Historical Society, Melbourne, 1982, p.6.
- ¹⁸ Loder & Bayly, Marilyn McBriar, *Heidelberg Conservation Study*, Part II, 'Historic Riverland Landscape Assessment', Heidelberg City Council, Melbourne, 1985. Map E, opp. p. 134 is the first map on which no Porter interests are shown.
- ¹⁹ Michael Cannon, & Ian Macfarlane, (eds) *Historic Records of Victoria*. Vol. 3, The early development of Melbourne 1836-1839, Melbourne, Vic. Gov. Printing Office, 1984, pp. 90-91.
- Michael Cannon & Ian Macfarlane, (eds) *Historic Records of Victoria*, Vol. 5, 'Surveyors' problems and achievements 1836-1839', Vic. Gov. Printing Office, Melbourne 1988, p. 191.
- ²⁰ Donald S. Garden, *Heidelberg: the land and its people, 1838-1900*, Melbourne University Press, 1972, p. 37, quoting *Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser*, 25 October 1841.
- ²¹ Edmund Finn, *Chronicles Of Early Melbourne 1835-1852*, Ferguson & Mitchell, Melbourne, 1888, p. 904.
- ²² Melbourne 'Explore History' <http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/colonial-Melbourne>, accessed May 2012.
- ²³ RGO Bk B, Mem 783.
- ²⁴ RGO Bk B, Mem 324.
- ²⁵ See Appendix: Letter dated 12 January 1841 from George Porter to C.J. La Trobe. *Superintendent's Correspondence, Letters received* VPRS 19/P, Unit 15, File 41/761.
- ²⁶ 1841 Census, New South Wales, for Heidelberg, District of Bourke.
- ²⁷ Michael Cannon & Ian Macfarlane, (eds), Map 47, Survey by T.H. Nutt & D.M. Kemp in 1839, Vic. Gov. Printing Office, Melbourne 1988, pp. 394-5.
- ²⁸ Garden, pp. 54-59.
- ²⁹ Cummins, pp. 13-14.
- ³⁰ *Port Phillip Gazette* 30 March 1842.
- ³¹ *Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser* 9 and 16 June 1842.
- ³² *Port Phillip Gazette* 22 June 1842.
- ³³ *Port Phillip Herald* 5 August 1842.
- ³⁴ *Port Phillip Herald* 21 February 1843.
- ³⁵ *Port Phillip Gazette* 17 October 1839.
- ³⁶ Finn, pp. 630-31.
- ³⁷ Finn, p. 221.
- ³⁸ *Port Phillip Patriot* 3 March 1842.
- ³⁹ Deborah Morris *Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne* Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2001, pp. 13-15.
- ⁴⁰ *Colonial Times* Hobart, 28 June 1842.
- ⁴¹ *Port Phillip Gazette* 6 April 1842.

⁴² Hilary Lewis *A history of St James Old Cathedral Melbourne* St James Old Cathedral, Canberra, Acorn Press, 1982, passim.

⁴³ *Port Phillip Gazette* 29 May and 9 June 1841.

⁴⁴ *Port Phillip Gazette* 26 June 1841.

⁴⁵ *Port Phillip Gazette* 18 November 1843.

⁴⁶ *Argus* 19 June 1846.

⁴⁷ *Port Phillip Herald* 11 July 1848.

⁴⁸ *Victorian pioneers index 1837-1888*, Deaths: Reg. no. 4525.

⁴⁹ Garden, pp. 92-93.

⁵⁰ T.A. Rank, *Wreghitt Rank – land sales in Heidelberg Melbourne*, Heidelberg Historical Society *Historian*, nos. 38 and 39, 1973.

⁵¹ Anne J. Tosolini, David Charteris McArthur: a Colonial Gentleman, MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 2002, passim.

⁵² VPRS 28/P2, Unit 799, File 102/553.

⁵³ Marcus Langdon, *John Villiers Trust* <http://jvtrust.org.au>. Accessed June 2013.

⁵⁴ *Port Phillip Herald* 2 March 1853.

Athenaeum Archives, Melbourne, March 2014

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