

## **The Meaker Legacy of Royal Park**

by Anthony Francis Ferguson

Francis Meaker served as the first Park Ranger/Crown Lands Bailiff for Royal Park from 1870 until he retired in 1905.

He and his newlywed bride Jane Meaker (nee Bartlett) arrived in Melbourne from Somerset as assisted immigrants in 1859. He was employed as a carter at the government Model Farm in Royal Park. When the farm was closed in 1862, he and two other employees were transferred to the Acclimatisation Society, the forerunner of the Melbourne Zoo.

The Meakers were moved into the spartan prefabricated iron cottage then known as The Lodge near the corner of Royal Parade and Gatehouse Street in 1862. Jane bore thirteen children, six of whom survived to become adults.

The State Heritage-listed cottage by the Australian Native Garden is now known as the Walmsley House (after the manufacturer in London). It is one of the survivors of the many prefabricated iron houses imported by Lieutenant-Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe to relieve acute housing shortages in the 1840s and 1850s.

Francis Meaker was named as the unpaid ranger for Royal Park in 1870 while continuing to work at the zoo. He is remembered by his descendants as working to preserve Royal Park and its flora and fauna for the health and welfare of future generations of the public, as the visionary Lt Governor La Trobe intended when he set aside some 295 hectares in 1854.

Francis and Jane's son Charles Meaker carried on the responsibility from 1905 and lived with his wife Alice in the iron cottage until he retired in 1934.

In Francis Meaker's time, Royal Park was still used as a camping ground by Aboriginal people. It is Wurundjeri land. Significant groups from the inland are also recorded as having camped there in 1844 and clans from the Corio and western areas in 1861. Francis Meaker may have at least supplied rations to Aboriginal people camping in or passing through Royal

Park. He is described in other accounts as having befriended them and being well known for offering them hospitality at the iron cottage. The last Aboriginal people were moved to Coranderrk near Healesville in 1904.

Jane Meaker raised lion cubs and birds at home at the iron cottage on behalf of the Acclimatisation Society/Zoo.

Sons, Charles and Edward Meaker, worked at the zoo too. Charles was initially employed as a ticket seller and Edward was employed to take care of an elephant newly arrived from Siam.

Francis and Charles Meaker as Crown Bailiffs for Royal Park had complex roles. They had to be caretakers, supervisors, bailiffs, rangers, prosecutors, cashiers, collectors and engineers. In 1923 Charles was recorded as being aided by only two labourers and the park received no government subsidy, depending on funds earned through grazing and the use of the park by eighty-two cricket teams and thirty football clubs.

The Meakers are among those who, in the face of the many challenges, have made and continue to make significant contributions to conserving Melbourne's unique inner city public park with its areas of bushland and important remnants of the pre-colonial landscape bequeathed by the Wurundjeri people, their elders past and present, the traditional custodians of the land of Royal Park to whom we offer our respect.

**Anthony Francis Ferguson is a grateful great-grandson of Francis and Jane Meaker.**