

## **Hunters Hill Medical Practice:**

### **A History of General Practice in Hunters Hill.**

**Dominic Bowes, March, 2012**

#### **Foreword:**

What follows is an account of the lives of the doctors who have worked as general practitioners in Hunters Hill over the last century and a half. This brief history of medicine in Hunters Hill remains a work in progress. I have combined the information I could find recorded about their lives and work, but there are still a number of gaps. The accounts of the nineteenth century doctors are drawn largely from newspaper accounts, whereas the latter work is largely from oral testimony and family memories. If anyone has any further information, anecdotes or memories to contribute, or notes any errors throughout the account please don't hesitate to contact the practice, or me directly.<sup>1</sup>

As it turns out, the history of general practice in Hunters Hill is as old as the suburb itself. The original doctor in the suburb, a man named Dr Jenner Plomley, was a signatory on the petition to the Colonial government requesting permission for Hunters Hill to become a municipality in 1860.<sup>2</sup>

The history of medicine in Hunters Hill, however, dates back much earlier than the official formation of the municipality in 1861. Henley was formerly known as Blandville after one of the most interesting early characters in the Hunters Hill area, Dr William Bland.<sup>3</sup> In 1837, Bland purchased 30 acres of land, now Henley, down by the Gladesville Psychiatric Hospital, which initially attracted doctors to the area.<sup>4</sup> Bland came to the colony of NSW as a convict in 1814, having been found guilty of murder after a duel in Bombay.<sup>5</sup> He was released early because of his medical skills and began to work in an Asylum at Castle Hill. Before long, however, Bland found himself in trouble with the law once more and after being charged with libel by Governor Macquarie he was sentenced to a year in prison.<sup>6</sup> It was a while after these tumultuous times that Bland settled in Hunters Hill and began work at the Gladesville Hospital at Bedlam Point.

Dr Plomley, however, was the first **g**eneral **m**edical **p**ractitioner in Hunters Hill and his life was as fascinating as it was tragic. Born in England in 1815, he graduated from the medical school at the University College, London in 1837.<sup>7</sup> Plomley migrated to Australia as the ship's surgeon aboard the *William Stewart* in 1848.<sup>8</sup> He took up residence in Hunters Hill in 1858 and constructed the house 'The Warren', in Wandella Avenue at the end of Herberton Avenue during 1859.<sup>9</sup> The house was built on a plot initially granted to Thomas Stubbs in 1836, and the house was destroyed in the construction of the freeway in the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> Aside from his medical background, Plomley was a keen photographer and artist. He specialised in landscape photography in and around Sydney Harbour. Writing to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1860, he made the bold claim that

through the discovery of a new agent he was approaching a degree of perfection that had so long eluded many photographers.<sup>11</sup> Though his own assessment of his work may have been overstated, Plomley did have some success in having his pictures exhibited in both Sydney and London.<sup>12</sup>

Plomley's medical practice occurred in the very earliest days of the discipline of general practice. In the years he worked in Hunters Hill, from 1860 until 1868 the population of Hunters Hill almost trebled and had reached 1423 by 1871.<sup>13</sup> Having left Hunters Hill at the age of fifty-five in 1868, Plomley's life ended quite tragically in 1869. He went away for a year as a surgeon on a ship, the *Harkaway* and when he returned he stayed at the Edinburgh Castle Hotel in Pitt St.<sup>14</sup> Plomley was found dead in late February 1869. A coronial inquest into his death found that he had committed suicide in Johnson's Bush near Petersham 'under a temporary fit of insanity'.<sup>15</sup> There was also unverified speculation that Plomley had previously been in a Lunatic Asylum prior to his emigration to Australia.<sup>16</sup>

The period after Dr Plomley's death is more of a mystery. A man named Dr. F.D Niblett began renting the property at 11 Alexandra St from Jeremiah Cronin in 1881. In 1887 he purchased the house, which would eventually become the residence of William Clifton, the suburb's first chemist.<sup>17</sup> The property, and 15 Alexandra Street on the other side of Hunters Hill Pharmacy were used as doctors' rooms from at least 1887 until 2009. There is scant written information about Dr Niblett. We do know that his practice in Clapton and Hackney in London was dissolved in 1871, but whether he arrived and practiced in Hunters Hill prior to the 1880s is less certain.<sup>18</sup>

One of Hunters Hill's most long serving doctors, Dr Sanderson Lloyd, arrived in the suburb in 1885 and practiced there until his death in 1913. Dr Lloyd was born and raised in Adelaide where he went to school at the prestigious St Peter's College.<sup>19</sup> A gifted

sportsperson, Lloyd was a noted sprinter and was amongst the College team that first played in some of the earliest cricket games on the Adelaide Oval.<sup>20</sup> Lloyd graduated from high school prior to the opening of Australia's first medical school at the University of Sydney in 1883. Accordingly, he set off to the United Kingdom where he was educated in the discipline of medicine at the University of Edinburgh.<sup>21</sup> On his return to Australia, Lloyd worked in Adelaide as a doctor before arriving in Hunters Hill.

Lloyd married in 1892 and patients and locals alike recalled the way his wife communicated to him when there were urgent calls. She would typically hang a towel from the upstairs window so that when he passed on his rounds he would know he was needed and return home.<sup>22</sup> In 1909 Dr Lloyd became the first resident of Hunters Hill to own a car, beginning a shift that would radically alter the suburb itself.<sup>23</sup> In his private times Dr Lloyd was said to be a great fan of the works of Kipling and enjoyed reading to his children and their friends.<sup>24</sup> Lloyd practiced locally until his death in 1913. He was beloved by the community, and Lloyd Avenue is named in his honour.

Soon after Lloyd's Death a Dr William Denniston purchased 'Wyngah' at 15 Alexandra St in 1914.<sup>25</sup> Whilst not a huge amount is known about Denniston, he was likely the doctor throughout the war era. He later relocated to work in the Eastern Suburbs. He died, rather tragically, in 1938 having fallen down the stairs on a double-decker bus.<sup>26</sup>

The period during and after the war saw a number of doctors practicing across the peninsula. One interesting character was a Dr Norman Robertson who practiced in the area from 1917-1919. Having been educated at Scots College, the University of Sydney and the University of Edinburgh, Robertson joined the armed forces.<sup>27</sup> During the First World War he served in the Australian Medical Corps. Reaching the rank of Major in 1916 he was in charge of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Light Field Ambulance. Robertson

was injured when a train he was travelling on was bombed and he had to return home. His wife, Neida, who had been serving in Egypt, came back aboard the same ship, which was torpedoed en route.<sup>28</sup> On his return from service he posted a simple advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald* stating that he would ‘resume practice at Hunters Hill on November 12”, in 1917.<sup>29</sup> Just eighteen months later he sold the practice, surgery and waiting room furniture to Dr Charles Wassell for the ‘princely sum’ of 1000 pounds.<sup>30</sup> Dr Wassell began practicing at ‘Zamali’ at 15 Alexandra St just two days later.<sup>31</sup> There is very little written information, to our knowledge, about Dr Wassell.

Having finished his education in 1923 at the University of Sydney a young Dr. John Morgan began to practice in Hunters Hill.<sup>32</sup> Dr Morgan had served in the 6<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade during the war and this delayed the completion of his medical studies.<sup>33</sup> Morgan was a keen rugby player who won a premiership for Sydney University and subsequently went on to be a selector for the state team in NSW. At just thirty-five years of age, Dr Morgan died of blood poisoning in 1931.<sup>34</sup> Throughout the 1930s it was Dr. Manning Hair, a man several of the more elderly patients from Hunters Hill Medical Practice still recalled in 2012, who practiced medicine from Alexandra St. while during the same period Dr Callaghan John McCarthy King was working out of 34 Woolwich Rd.

Dr Callaghan John McCarthy King began practicing in the area in 1934. This was his first practice having previously worked as a resident at the Children’s Hospital, then in Camperdown, and at Lewisham. He had also worked a number of locums in Young and Cessnock as well as being a ship’s doctor around New Guinea and the Pacific Islands. Dr King, ‘Cal’, had bought the practice most likely located at 46 Woolwich Rd from a Charlie Laws. A newlywed, Dr King began renting the new Art Deco house at 40 Woolwich Rd, to which he relocated the practice. In 1937 he and his wife were able to

purchase land at 34 Woolwich Rd, which had previously been a nursery, in anticipation of the arrival of their child, Justin. Dr King's practice involved the use of diverse skills. He typically did surgery on Wednesdays and delivered many children at Ryde DSM Hospital in addition to his surgery and house visits. He was also heavily involved with the local medical community more broadly, serving on the staff of the out-patients clinic at Sydney Hospital and as a long-term member and occasional chair of the Medical Board at the Ryde Hospital.

The war would considerably re-shape Dr King's involvement in the community. He was involved in the Hunters Hill Branch of the National Emergency Service, which conducted drills preparing for any potential Japanese attack. His son Justin recalls one instance, for example, where more than eighty men and the local fire services simulated a bombing of St Joseph's. Moreover, Cal was called up and commissioned as a captain in the Army Medical Corps. On a number of occasions he was away in camp, sometimes for a fortnight or a month and once for an entire year. The fear of Japanese attacks having subsided, Dr King went into partnership with Dr Marie Grainger of Wharf Road Gladesville, to get some relief from being on call seven days. The two doctors alternated Sunday duties, an arrangement that continued with the Anderson twins who bought Dr Grainger's practice. In the latter years of the war and particularly after 1945 Dr King began practicing more in Gladesville.

Dr Jack Walker took over from Manning-Hair from 1939 onwards. Dr Walker worked for over three decades from at 15 Alexandra St as a highly respected general practitioner. He is fondly recalled by many of the current elderly residents of Hunters Hill. Dr Walker, had graduated from the University of Sydney in 1823, and arrived in Hunters Hill from Holbrook. Dr Walker regularly practiced obstetrics and surgery; he typically worked at Alexandra St in the morning, and then saw patients at professional

suites in Gladesville till noon. In the afternoons he would visit patients in their homes before returning to Alexandra St for a further few hours of surgery. He was on call seven days a week. During the War, Dr Walker was involved in Sydney's civil defence. Dr John Marshall bought Dr Walker's practice and worked in Hunters Hill throughout the 1970s also at 15 Alexandra St.

Dr Marshall sold the practice to Dr David Dalgiesh in 1979. Dr Dalgiesh moved the rooms from 15 to 11 Alexandra Street and was soon joined by Dr Margot Cunich who was the first full time woman doctor in the practice. Dr Mary Lou Shiel, another notable woman doctor in Hunters Hill, also practiced from her home further down Alexandra Street for many years. Dr Andrew Bowes began working with Doctors Dalgiesh and Cunich in 1984, and Doctors Keane, Wood and Newton joined the team subsequently.

The most recent chapter in the history of Hunters Hill Medical Practice concerns the movement of the practice to 6 Ryde Rd on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2009. In contrast to the pioneer practitioner Dr Plomley, who was amongst the original 60 residents signing the petition to become a Municipality, the practice now has in excess of 10,000 active patients. Whilst both numbers 15 and 11 Alexandra St are inextricably linked to the history of General Practice in the suburb, the heritage listing of no. 11 and capacity of just two consulting rooms meant it was unable to deal with the ongoing expansion of the practice. At 6 Ryde Rd there are now five consulting rooms. In addition to the expansion in the number of General Practitioners, the practice now includes Physiotherapists, Pathology services, Dieticians and Psychologists and practice nurses.

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<sup>2</sup> Sherry, 'Hunter's Hill: Australia's Oldest Garden Suburb', p60.

<sup>3</sup> Hunters Hill Historical Society, 'Original Land Grantees of Hunters Hill', pp2-3.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> The London Medical Gazette, Volume 20, p333, via Google Books, accessed 27/3/12.

<sup>8</sup> 'Port Phillip Arrivals', *Sydney Chronicle*, 23/5/1848, p2.

<sup>9</sup> Biography of Jenner Plomley, *Design & Art Australia Online*,  
[http://www.daaio.org.au/bio/jenner-plomley/#artist\\_biography](http://www.daaio.org.au/bio/jenner-plomley/#artist_biography)

<sup>10</sup> Sherry, 'Hunter's Hill: Australia's Oldest Garden Suburb', p99.

<sup>11</sup> Jenner Plomley, 'To The Editor of the Herald', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21/11/1860, p2.

<sup>12</sup> Biography of Jenner Plomley, *Design & Art Australia Online*.

<sup>14</sup> 'Suicide: Coroner's Inquest', *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 6/3/1869, p2

<sup>15</sup> 'News of the Week', *Bell's Life in Sydney and Sporting Chronicle*, 20/2/1869, p3.

<sup>16</sup> 'Suicide: Coroner's Inquest', *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 6/3/1869, p2.

<sup>17</sup> The Hunters Hill Trust, 'Heritage of Hunter's Hill', p61.

<sup>18</sup> 'Notices', *The London Gazette*, 6/1/1871, p52.

<sup>19</sup> 'Personal', *The Advertiser*, 6/10/1913, p14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Isadore Brodsky, *Hunters Hill 1861-1961*, p50.

<sup>23</sup> Sherry, *Hunters Hill*, p88.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> The Hunters Hill Trust, 'Heritage of Hunter's Hill', p61.

<sup>26</sup> 'Doctor's Fatal Fall from Bus', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30/3/1938, p18.

<sup>27</sup> 'Obituary: Dr Norman Robertson', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9/1/1931, p5.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Special Advertisements’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9/11/1917, p6.

<sup>30</sup> Norman Keith Robertson and Neida Playfair, Robertson Family,  
<http://belindacohen.tripod.com/robertsonfamilywilliamofalvie/id3.html>

<sup>31</sup> ‘Advertising’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3/5/1919, p16.

<sup>32</sup> Obituary: Dr John Morgan’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7/4/1931, p11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.