

THE HISTORY OF ST. KILDA

FROM ITS
FIRST SETTLEMENT TO A CITY

AND AFTER

1840 TO 1930

VOLUME I.

Compiled by Order of the St. Kilda City Council

by

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“Aut scribenda agere, aut legenda scribere.”

*“To do what is meet to be recorded, or to write
what is worthy to be read.”*

[Inscription taken from the monument of John Stow, London's
16th Century Historian and Topographer]

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Melbourne :

PRINTERS PROPRIETARY LIMITED
27 LITTLE BOURKE STREET

1931

CHAPTER IX.

Captain Kenney, and His Bathing Ship the Old Whaling Brig "Nancy"—An Historical St. Kilda Circular—Captain Kenney's Claims to be the First Baths Proprietor Considered—Corrective Dates—Mrs. Ford's First Bathing Establishment—Prominent Men of the Day Associate Themselves with Kenney's Swimming Carnivals—"Orion" Horne and Others—Chinese Fishermen—Hegarty's Baths—Demolition of Kenney's Baths—Agitation for Their Retention.

TO many Melbourne men, early St. Kilda was, to a large extent, visualised as Captain Kenney's Bathing Ship Baths. The Captain and his Bathing Ship were known throughout Australia. Men visiting Melbourne from "way back," at the times of holiday, and racing carnivals, invariably found themselves in Kenney's baths, washing off, as it was said, the dust of the hot plains, by taking a "dip" in the sea, at the "old bathing ship." The captain was pleased to talk, in after years, to his patrons, dwindling in numbers, of the squatters and the wool kings who made his baths their cleansing Mecca when they came to town.

So outstanding was this ship bathing establishment on the St. Kilda beach front, and so early in the settlement of St. Kilda did Captain Kenney make his appearance, that the Captain has been commonly supposed to be the pioneer of bathing establishments on the St. Kilda shoreline. The Captain advertised in a circular, issued in the years of the sixties, that he was the original projector of sea-bathing accommodation at St. Kilda. The preservation of this advertising circular was due to the care of his daughter, Miss Kenney, who gave it to us some seventeen years ago. In the circular the reader may hear speaking, in his characteristic style, the short, stout, freckled, bluff, choleric, good-natured Captain William Kenney. He was born at Harwich, the seaport of Essex, in the year 1820. As a boy the tang of the sea was in his nostrils, and the hollow-sounding noise, the plunk! plunk! of shipbuilders' hammers while being used in caulking decks with oakum was in his ears. Strange, bearded seamen, suggesting adventure, came to

Harwich, fresh from the foreign ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam, and then there were the sailors from the port of wonderful London. These sea associations stirred thoughts of voyaging in the mind of young Kenney. He spoke of such things to us—of his youth—in the days of our own youth, though he was usually a man of few words.

The Captain's life environment made him a fighter, since the days of his disillusionment, when he went to sea as a ship's boy in a collier that sailed the cold grey North Sea. Brighter days came with his manhood, when he rose to be a ship's captain. He arrived in Melbourne, from Liverpool, on December 16, 1852, in command of the ship "Yarmouth," which he had chartered to convey emigrants to Victoria. After completing that charter successfully he decided to make his home in Melbourne. He bought a small vessel called "The Apprentice," and commenced to make trade ventures in her along the coast, and continued to do so until "The Apprentice" was wrecked on King Island. Marooned on that island, Captain Kenney decided to attempt to make the adventurous voyage through Bass Straits to Port Phillip. A small open boat, the ship's dinghy, had been saved from the wreck. She was partly boarded over before Captain Kenney, with his crew of two men, started for Melbourne. They reached Hobson's Bay, and the Captain's dauntless seamanship was admired by shipmasters, who knew the perils of the passage, and by others. That experience closed Captain Kenney's sea career as a ship's captain.

With such knowledge of the man, the reader may the more readily appreciate the hardy Captain's circular, wherein, by the way, his name is spelt Kenny, without the "e." The circular reads:—

"THE BATHING SHIP," ST. KILDA BEACH.

This Bathing Establishment has peculiar claims upon the support of the Public, inasmuch as its Proprietor, Capt. William Kenny, was in the year 1853, the original Projector of Sea-Bathing accommodation to the inhabitants of Melbourne and its vicinity. Up to the above period, all persons, no matter what their degree or position, must, in order to enjoy a Sea Bath, have submitted to an *al fresco toilette* on the open Beach, exposing themselves (however unwillingly) to the gaze of persons within range of observation. To most persons this mode of obtaining a bath was absolutely objectionable, and but few persons ventured on Sea-Bathing under such circumstances. Consequently there was but small encouragement for "capitalists" to provide an accom-

modation manifestly required, but which, nevertheless promised only very remote prospects of "interest on capital." With this difficulty apparent to him Captain Kenny, however, in the year 1853, invested all his available capital in the purchasing and placing the Bathing Ship "Nancy" in her present condition, firmly believing that our citizens would sooner or later appreciate the advantages of a "comfortable and decent plunge in the open sea." The first season did not pay. The second season did pay, and the profits were devoted to improvements in the accommodation. The third season was a "decided success." So decided, indeed, that the speculation was considered too good a thing to be enjoyed by Captain Kenny alone—even though his private enterprise had led to the result, and very soon after his success becoming apparent, he found his unaided "Private Enterprise" was opposed by a Public Company. Captain Kenny does not complain of this competition, for success in any undertaking naturally leads to opposition; but still, in competing with his powerful opponents, he would remind the Public that "The Bathing Ship" is *the original St. Kilda Bath*. Notwithstanding his private resources must of necessity be more limited than the means of competition possessed by a Public Company, Captain Kenny now with confidence, and some amount of honest pride, asserts that, although it may not be so ornamental in exterior, yet still his old unpretending establishment will bear favourable comparison with his opponents in all material points, and that he can now offer to his liberal patrons a Bath in the best Bathing Site in the Colony! **FENCED IN AND FREE FROM FISH!** The bottom is composed of a thick layer of fine sand, and consequently the Diver can enjoy his plunge without danger. The depth of water varies from 12 to 3 feet, affording facilities, as well to the inexperienced as to the experienced Swimmer. To the latter, the site is peculiarly advantageous, inasmuch as it contains the largest swimming area in the Colony, fenced in and free from observation.

**NOTE! ADMITTED TO BE THE BEST BATHING GROUND
UP TO THIS DATE!**

Captain Kenney's claim to be the first person to provide accommodation for bathers on the St. Kilda Beach, was not literally correct, though he may not have considered an earlier fugitive attempt to establish baths as insufficient to deprive him of his claim. In newspaper articles written about Captain Kenney and his ship baths, and such public references were numerous at one time, the date of the Captain's arrival in Melbourne has repeatedly been given as in the year 1850. Man's memory is a frail reed to lean upon alongside the support that is given by the written word, and documented dates. Captain Kenney, according to the Melbourne Custom House Shipping Register, now in the Melbourne Public Library, arrived during the close of the year 1852, viz., December 16. For business

purposes the new year must have seen the launch of "The Apprentice" adventure, and its unfortunate end on the rocks of King Island. During this time the record for providing the first commercial bathing facility at St. Kilda was made by a woman, Mrs. Ford, who provided, in the year 1853, a bathing shelter for bathers, wherein they could undress, and dress, in private. Her baths were on the south side of the jetty. When Captain Kenney was safe from the perils of shipwreck in Melbourne, and began to contemplate a sea baths speculation, and when he visited St. Kilda he thought that Mrs. Ford had secured the best bathing site on the beach, and he bought what rights of site and material Mrs. Ford had.

In his circular Captain Kenney says: "Captain Kenney, however, in the year 1853, invested all his available capital in the purchasing and placing the Bathing Ship Nancy in her present 'condition' (position ?), firmly believing that our citizens would sooner or later appreciate the advantages of a 'comfortable and decent plunge in the open sea.'" This circular has always been regarded by those interested in early St. Kilda as authoritative on the question of the date when the old bathing ship, the "Nancy," was first anchored at her St. Kilda moorings. It can be regarded no longer as authoritative in that particular. The shipping records show:—

SHIPPING INTELLIGENCE.

February 20. Nancy, Swedish brig, 200 tons, C. C. Nordquerb, from Hong Kong, 13th July, via Swan River, 20th January. Passengers.—Cabin: Messrs. F. Knoop, C. Weiss, and forty in the steerage. F. Knoop, agent.

The Melbourne Customs House Shipping Register states that the brig arrived on February 23, 1854. She brought a mixed cargo, mostly packages, and cases; contents not specified. Among the items of cargo enumerated were:—30 bales of salt fish, 5 tomb-stones, 71 pine planks, and a considerable quantity of brandy, sherry, and champagne, in casks and cases.

"The Argus" newspaper, on February 21, 1854, says: "This Swedish brig sailed from Hong Kong on 13th July, and came to Melbourne via Swan River" (Perth, W.A.).

The same paper published a paragraph, in its news columns, in the form of a warning notice:—"Look out. We perceive forty steerage passengers by the Nancy from Hong Kong, via Swan

River. Are these men bond or free?" The reason of the paragraph was that Melbourne people were suspicious of those who came from Swan River, which was then a Crown convict colony.

The date shown in the Register of the arrival of the "Nancy," 23/2/54, is evidently three days out. The date the 20th is shown on the ship's passenger list. That the brig arrived in the month of February, 1854, is a fact, and that being so, it is obvious that Captain Kenney blundered when he stated he placed the "Nancy" in St. Kilda waters as a bathing ship, in the year 1853.

Thus it was, in the year 1854, that Captain Kenney bought the Swedish brig, of 200 tons, the "Nancy," after a protracted voyage from Hong Kong. At the time of her purchase she was laid up in the port of Melbourne for sale, in the same way as dozens of other ships were deteriorating in Hobson's Bay, wanting, and unable to obtain, crews. Sailors of such ships had deserted them, and made off to the gold diggings. The sea-going conditions of the "Nancy" were probably much worse than those of the ships for sale anchored about her. It was said that her timbers were worm-eaten, green with marine growth, and carpeted with barnacles. The ship's surveyors condemned her as unseaworthy. She was believed to have been sailing the seas for a period of one hundred and fifty years, or more. Made of teak throughout, she was built in the dockyards at Gothenburg, and her timbers were bolted, and clamped together by experienced Norsemen. She had no claim to beauty. Her bluff-apple-faced bow was the type of bow designed in those pre-clipper-lined days of ship building, but the bows were ones that gave the waves buffet for buffet, and it was man, who made her, who wrecked the "Nancy" brig at last. Her construction showed that she was originally built as a whaler to stand the crush of pack ice in the Arctic seas. The wooden beams, forming her sides, were six inches by four inches, and on the top of her timbers there was a heavy covering of felt, and the felt blanket had over it a sheath of iron plates. Inside the ship was a network of wooden knees, measuring eight inches by twelve inches in thickness. A three-inch decking was supported by beams, eight inches by eight inches, placed together unusually close. She was 96 feet in length, and she had a beam

of 26 feet. She was sailing the seas when Captain Cook was cruising along the Australian coast line, in the "Endeavour," in 1770. The brig "Nancy" was slightly larger than the "Santa Maria," in which Columbus bravely sailed into the unknown seas, and discovered the new world. The "Santa Maria's" measurements were 90 feet of a keel line, and a beam of 29 feet.

Captain Kenney dismantled the brig, selling her fittings, but he retained her bell. Reality and romance lay about the brass-tongued voice of the brig. Through fair weather and foul it had sounded over many seas. Hundreds of sailors, when the brig was alive on the waters, had sprung from their berths, with strange, and foreign oaths, at the bell's call in the early watches of "dirty nights at sea." So Captain Kenney would not part the bell from the hull, and the bell went with the brig, when she was towed across Hobson's Bay to St. Kilda.

When the Captain anchored the brig he did so at the spot to the south of the present pier, about half-way from the south end of the Esplanade. The place was Mrs. Ford's bathing area which Captain Kenney had bought as a suitable place for the ship's baths. The brig was scuttled and beached in the depth of ten to twelve feet of water, and she lay well out from the shore. Captain Kenney provided a boat for intending bathers, and the "Nancy" was linked to the shore by a rope that had threaded on it a large iron ring. To the ring was attached the painter of the boat. Intending bathers on the shore entered the boat, and pulled themselves, by aid of the connecting rope, to the brig. After the Captain's vessel had been in that location for a few weeks, the Hobson Bay Harbor authorities gave the Captain notice that he would have to remove the brig to the other side of the jetty, in a line with Fitzroy Street. When he received the summons the "Nancy" was settled in a sand bed, with twelve feet of water in her hold. A square hole, about two feet by one, had been cut in her stern, and this was made watertight to allow the water to be pumped out of the hold to refloat her. The refloating of the brig, with the aid of two barges, and the removal of the scuttled hull of the heavily timbered whaling brig was a tedious and an expensive work.

Captain Kenney grumbled to the last at what he considered was the arbitrary action of the Government in supporting the

Harbor Trust authorities in the enforcement of the ruinous order for removal of the brig to the north of the jetty. He had personal knowledge of the action of jetties, groins, and the encroachments of the sea at his native town of Harwich. His grievance, and his claims for compensation against the Government, for the enforced removal of the ship bathing pool, were that the St. Kilda jetty would act as a groin or piled breakwater, and it would cause the floating sand, and shingle, to accumulate within the limits of his sea lease on the north, and be hurtful to him when the time came for him to extend seawards from the "Nancy." Already he said the peak of the jetty had diverted by its thrust the channel of the shore scour of the bay waters running southward to the Red Bluff.

The shoaling of Captain Kenney's baths was obvious at low tide at the time the mouth of the River Yarra was being deepened, and the silt barges discharged their contents into the bay waters. The baths area then extended seawards from the "Nancy" for some distance. Further extensions of his baths fence were made by the Captain in the hope of retaining the depth of twelve feet of water for bathing. The continual sand filling, tide borne, was injurious to the baths' depths, and ruinous to what the Captain called "my vested interests." The same sand shoaling has since proved beneficial to tens of thousand of holidays makers who frequent St. Kilda beach to-day. The diverted scour of the sea current by the pier has caused long, clean-floored sandbanks to form with graduating western edges to the deepening water.

The sand accumulations precipitated by the scour destroyed acres of sea grass beds that were spawning grounds for fish. How prolific these waters were with harvests of fish is shown by a newspaper paragraph in the *Bendigo Advertiser*, Jan. 5, 1857, which states that two wealthy Chinese had established fish curing houses for fish caught at St. Kilda, Geelong, and Schnapper Point. The cured fish were exported to China. A dozen boats, manned by Europeans and Americans, in numbers from 20 to 40 persons, were engaged in catching schnapper, and selling the fish to the Chinese, who paid to the fishermen as much as £1000 a year for their harvests from the sea. Some of the coolie Chinese fishermen lived in tents, and huts, on the West Beach, St. Kilda, then, in winter, a dismal shore line

between marshlands, and the sea. In dry seasons the place was a drifting desert of sand.

Buvelot, the Swiss-Australian painter of "A Winter Morning in Heidelberg," and other pictures, in the Melbourne National Gallery, thought the Chinese shanties on the St. Kilda beach picturesque enough to make a lead pencil sketch of them. The St. Kilda Council eventually ejected the three or four old Chinese, from their collection of old iron, bags, wood, and mud bricks, which the fishermen called their homes. Years afterwards a tin box was found in the sand, close to where the shanties stood, by one of the men engaged in the work of construction of the military road now called the Beaconsfield Parade. The box contained twenty or thirty sovereigns of the reign of George IV. As the box also had in it water worn gold, there was room for speculation as to whether a Chinese, or European miner had hidden the treasure trove, and what had become of him?

During one stormy night, in the year 1858, a "southerly buster" swept the fences of Kenney's baths away, and the shore of St. Kilda was littered with the baths' wreckage. To obviate the chance of such a wreckage happening again, the Captain drove large redgum piles into the sand so deeply, that they remained immovable until the baths and fencing were finally demolished. Again, in the great floods of 1862, the bathing ship was washed over on its side, such was the force of the flood waters rushing out of the mouth of the Yarra, and swirling along the St. Kilda shore. Captain Kenney at that time lived with his family on the brig, wherein most of his children were born. In trouble he succeeded in landing them on the St. Kilda beach. He returned to the brig. The flood waters increased, and he was marooned for three days, his food and water supplies running short.

When the brig "Nancy" was settled in its new position, at the shore foot of Fitzroy Street, the use of the roped ferry boat, from shore to brig, was abandoned. Captain Kenney, knowing his ship was permanently anchored, connected the shore with the ship by a small slender pierway. Thousands of bathers in the years passed along that narrow pier, for Kenney's Baths were popular. In the heyday of their prosperity they were the accepted place for Melbourne people to hold marine sports, and

sea carnivals, specially at the beginning of the New Year. High prices, from three to five shillings, were charged by Captain Kenney, but still crowds (for those days) numbering seven or eight hundred spectators, paid for entrance to the baths. What