Buckhurst Street

Buckhurst Street was part of a small community in South Melbourne known as the Montague district. The area became known as Montague around the time Montague Railway Station was built in 1883. Its boundaries were Ferrars Street, Boundary Street, City Road and the railway line. Montague was a residential area filled with small cottages designed for working class people. By 1900, Montague had more than 1000 households along 22 streets and lanes.¹

Like other working-class areas around Melbourne including Carlton, Collingwood and Richmond, many of the residents of Montague were attracted to the location because of the low-cost housing and proximity to factories and other places of employment. Many residents were mariners, shipwrights in the nearby shipping industry, and there were also many boilermakers, firemen and labourers.²

Houses in Montague were mostly built from wood, and consisted of only two or three rooms. They were constructed quickly, and rarely included bathrooms as there was no sewerage system. Demand for housing in South Melbourne increased faster than land could be made ready. As a result, houses and dwellings were built on areas of swampy, unstable land that was prone to flooding. A newspaper described:

… new houses going up daily in thick clusters, evidently intended for persons of the artisan class … The land has been built upon before it was filled up, and before the street levels were properly adjusted. Children are being reared – as seems to be the case all over the metropolis – in large numbers.³

Conditions worsened in the 1920s when many of these weatherboard homes were overcome with damp and decay as a result of periodic flooding in the area.⁴

But for the people who lived there, Montague was their home and their community. There was a school, church, police station, kindergarten, hotels, and shops. Montague even had its own football team.⁵ One street in particular embodied the very spirit of community in Montague: Buckhurst Street.

¹ ‘Montague the Lost Community’, City of Port Phillip, https://heritage.portphillip.vic.gov.au/People_places/Significant_places_in_Port_Phillip/Montague_The_Lost_Community
³ Argus, 16 August 1884, p. 13.
By 1930, the Sands and McDougall street directory listed close to 160 dwellings in Buckhurst Street, and more than 140 of them were residential. The commercial listings included grocers, butchers, friterers, and a confectionery factory. There was also a maternal health centre and the Lady Northcote Free Kindergarten, which opened in 1912. It was an active, family-oriented community.

From the early 1900s there were concerns about the living conditions of the working poor in areas including Montague. This had increased to the point that a Slum Investigation Committee was formed by the Victorian government. It's report led to the establishment of the Housing Commission of Victoria in 1937. By the late 1930s, the whole Montague area was marked to be demolished and major slum-clearance projects through the 1950s and 1960s occurred.

Meanwhile, life continued for the residents of Buckhurst Street. In 1954, Buckhurst Street made headlines in the Argus’ ‘Christmas Street Party’ contest. The newspaper was looking to award a Christmas street party to the street with the most children per 100 yards. Buckhurst Street hit the lead on 3 December when the newspaper found 130 children in a 150-yard stretch. The street was nominated for the contest by twelve-year-old resident Ellen Freeman, who said to reporters:

Buckhurst st. is my street … and I reckon it is the best street in South Melbourne, Melbourne and Victoria. If we win this contest, the best kiddies in Victoria will get a Christmas treat worthy of them.

The newspaper described Buckhurst Street as anything but 'palatial … workers' homes, with little, if any gardens, and no wide open spaces'. But it was a street with a 'wonderful spirit … If you live in Buckhurst st. you belong to it, and to everybody else who lives in the street'.

Sadly, the children of Buckhurst Street were pipped at the post by their neighbours one block away. Thistlethwaite Street took out the prize. The street party was held on 24 December 1954, and included food, drinks and games, as well as a special appearance from Santa with some toys.

By 1960, the landscape of Buckhurst Street was rapidly changing. Many families had left Montague as a result of the slum-clearance projects. Residential housing was in decline and what used to be family homes were demolished to be replaced by commercial and industrial buildings. By 1970, industrial and commercial operations made up close to a third of the street's occupancy.

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10 Argus, 3 December 1954, p. 8.
11 Argus, 3 December 1954, p. 8.
12 Argus, 23 December 1954, p. 3.
Looking at the industrial landscape that is Buckhurst Street today, it is difficult to imagine that 130 children played up and down the street in 1954. However, this street, as well as the whole area known as Montague, is now part of what is said to be Australia's largest urban renewal project of Fishermans Bend. By 2050, this area is projected to house 80,000 residents and provide 80,000 jobs. Buckhurst Street might once again be filled with the voices of children and families.