The Great Iron Store

The Great Iron Store, erected in Cecil Street in 1853, was the first meeting place for the residents of Emerald Hill. It was here that a public meeting of Emerald Hill residents voted to separate Emerald Hill from the City of Melbourne in 1855.

Emerald Hill was one of Melbourne’s rapidly growing suburbs. By 1852 it lacked basic roads, reliable water supplies or refuse disposal facilities. On 14 December 1854, the Victorian government passed legislation allowing the establishment of separate municipal boroughs. Emerald Hill residents were the first to take advantage of this Act. But as the Act did not allow for the separation of districts from existing municipalities and, as Emerald Hill was included in the City of Melbourne, Emerald Hill’s plans for separation were frustrated. Three noisy public meetings were held in the Great Iron Store between March and May 1855, which successfully led to the legislation being amended. At the final meeting on 8 May, prominent resident James Service moved:

*That it is the opinion of this meeting that separation from Melbourne is necessary for the propriety of the district and the welfare of the inhabitants.*

On 26 May 1855 Emerald Hill was declared a municipal district, and immediate steps were taken to elect the council. The first municipal election took place on 29 June 1855 in Alfred Withers’ Great Iron Store. Emerald Hill became the first suburb outside of Geelong to be declared a municipal district. The town’s motto *In Ordine Primum* (First in the Field) reflects this.

The Great Iron Store’s proprietor, Alfred Withers, came to Victoria in 1851, seeking his fortune on the goldfields. Having found it, he sailed back to England to ask Margaret Buck to marry him. On his return to Melbourne, Withers imported an iron building from England. Opening as a general store in 1853, it became known as the Great Iron Store. Alfred and Margaret ran this store together for nearly thirty years.

The Great Iron Store was used as a public hall until the construction of the Mechanics’ Institute in 1857. It served various purposes, including that of a temporary church for several congregations.

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2 *Argus* 9 May 1855.
5 Charles Daley, *History of South Melbourne: from the foundation of settlement at Port Phillip to the year 1938*, (Melbourne: Robertson & Mullens, 1940), 55.