The house of terrible secrets

PRESERVE NOTORIOUS ABORTION HOSPITAL

National Trust urges

EASTBOURNE House, the former home and hospital of Dr. Samuel Peacock, one of Melbourne's most notorious abortionists, should be preserved as part of our national heritage, the Classification Committee of the National Trust has announced.

Eastbourne House, at the corner of Wellington Parade and Simpson Street, East Melbourne, featured prominently in Dr. Peacock's three trials for murder 65 years ago.

But it is not the grisly stories that the walls could tell if they could speak which fascinates the custodians of Victoria's past.

The Trust is concerned to preserve "this remarkable brick corner house and two adjacent terrace houses built 1900-1903 for Dr. Samuel Peacock by the architect Robert Haddon."

There is also fascination for the "stressed perpendicular corner turret and cantilevered balconette" and the "characteristic flowing curves of the wrought iron balustrade."

But it wasn't the stressed perpendicular corner turret or the cantilevered balconette which had Melbourne's morbid masses congregating in Wellington Parade in the last days of August, 1911.

They were there to stare at the solid brick walls and heavily curtained windows of the big corner house which showed no sign of life.

HEADLINES

Newspaper headlines had sent a wave of shock and horror through the community — headlines such as this sample from Truth, September 2, 1911

ABORTION MURDER ALLEGED
THE VICTIM'S BODY MISSING
Mysterious Informant and Statement of Paramour
Private Maternity Hospital Raided
Dr. Samuel Peacock Arrested

Truth's report said: "The arrest of Dr. Samuel Peacock, of 62 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne, on Wednesday afternoon, on a charge of having wilfully murdered a single young woman, named Mary Margaret Davies, 26 years of age, has created a sensation among all classes of the community."

The report continued that the Criminal Investigation Department had been told that Miss Davies was "missing" from Dr. Peacock's maternity hospital, and that her paramour was a young fellow named Clifford Poke, employed as a packer by Henry Berry & Co., merchants, Collins Street.

FATAL

Poke boarded with the missing girl's family at 23 Howe Crescent, South Melbourne.

It was alleged that as the result of "improper conduct" which had occurred between Poke and the girl she had passed herself off as "Mrs. Nelson" and had been operated upon with fatal results at Dr. Peacock's establishment.

Poke told detectives he visited "Mrs. Nelson" at Dr. Peacock's hospital on August 10 after she had been operated on, and on other occasions up till August 17, when Dr. Peacock told him she "was not so well".

Next day he was not permitted to see Miss Davies and Peacock asked him: "If anything happens, what will you do?"

When Poke told Peacock they weren't married, Peacock said: "You'd better leave things to me."

Three nights later Poke met Peacock at the corner of Clarendon Street and Wellington Parade. Peacock told him Miss Davies had died that morning.

Peacock said: "Keep the facts to yourself. If her friends do not look for her for a fortnight, I shall be able to have her secretly buried or it will be bad for both of us."

When Poke went to the hospital two weeks later, Peacock told him he had disposed of the body, had burnt the clothes and "done away" with the jewellery.

A parcel of crushed brooches, a bangle and other remnants of jewellery which were identified by the missing girl's mother were found when the detectives searched the premises.

They also found portion of a hat, scraps of a fur necklet, hair combings or cuttings from a woman's head, two bits of bones the size of buttons and a soiled apron.

The police search was one of the most thorough of all time. They were aided by Robert Haddon, the architect who built the house, several employees of the Board of Works and other experts.

Dr. Peacock denied ever having seen or treated a Mrs. Nelson. However, he was arrested and charged with murder.

The wheels of justice turned faster in those days. The committal proceedings began two weeks later and Dr. Peacock, then aged 72, stood trial on October 16, 1911.

Newspapers, more concerned for giving their readers what they wanted than observing legal niceties, engaged in an orgy of speculation between the arrest and committal.



★ *ABORTIONIST Dr. Samuel Peacock who faced a murder charge . . . a sketch from Truth, September 23, 1911.*

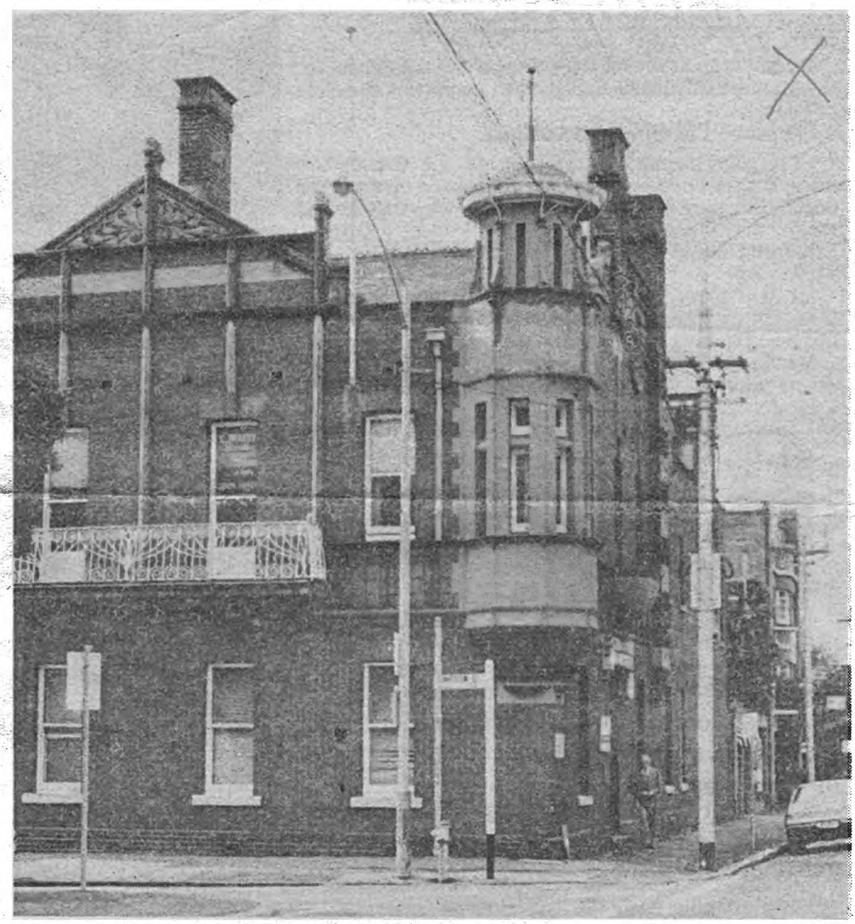
FLESH

Truth said: "There is only one conclusion that can be logically arrived at and that is that her remains must have been dissected, boiled down and treated with chemicals with a view to disposing of every particle of flesh and bone . . .

"Attached to Dr. Peacock's kitchen there is a room containing a large copper, an enamelled trough and a sink. Medical men assert that, within 48 hours, a body could be disintegrated and, with the aid of potent chemicals such as a medical man would have no difficulty in procuring or using, could be reduced to a mass of liquefaction and poured down the Board of Works sewers. Such an expert operation leaves no trace."

Participation in this gruesome guessing game landed the newspapers in court on contempt charges, of which they were found guilty.

For having published a report in which it surmised the girl's body had been cut up and burned, the Age was fined $400. The Argus had talked about dissolving the body in acid, while the Herald stated that "thirteen young women had been missed from Dr. Peacock's hospital".



★ *IF walls could speak . . . Eastbourne House in Wellington Parade, East Melbourne, as it is today. The former hospital is now let as professional offices.*

The spotlight was turned on the accused's history. Dr. Peacock, a bachelor of medicine and master of surgery, had been in practice about 40 years, and during the first 20 did not appear to have made much money.

PATIENTS

About 18 years earlier he had commenced practice in a large three-storey residence in Johnston Street, Fitzroy and subsequently established a private hospital which, after some delay, was registered by the authorities.

He displayed great ability in treating women, married and single, and provided bed accommodation, medical attendance and nursing for a fortnight for $20.

His fame spread rapidly through the northern suburbs and then all over Victoria. His hospital was always full and he often had to refuse patients.

Dr. Peacock's numerous patients had great confidence in his skill in midwifery; he had few childbirth fatalities at a time when they were common.

But in 1900, when he transferred a girl to Alfred Hospital after she had been in his own hospital for a month, the doctors called the police.



★ *THIS sketch of Eastbourne House appeared with the story of Dr. Peacock's arrest in Truth, September 9, 1911.*

SITE

The girl, Mary Cairns, told police Dr. Peacock had used an instrument on her and he was charged with the offence.

He was acquitted at his trial and then his practice increased by leaps and bounds.

Dr. Peacock moved to a big, old-fashioned house in Wellington Parade and two years later — in April 1902 —

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Abortion doctor left a fortune

FROM P6

bought a large block of land at the corner of Wellington Parade and Simpson Street for $3300.

On this site he built his "up-to-date maternity hospital of 16 rooms, eight of which are bedrooms."

His usual fees were $70 for maternity inmates but if patients were unable to pay more he would take $50.

The hospital was always full and he acquired other properties at Cheltenham, Mordialloc and Neerim where he also accommodated maternity and convalescent cases.

By 1910 Dr. Peacock's income was estimated at $30,000 to $40,000 a year.

Dr. Peacock's alleged abortion activities got an airing on occasions, such as when a girl ill in Ballarat Hospital claimed she had been operated upon at a large hospital in East Melbourne.

Then, in a divorce case, a Mrs. Strachan said her husband, a policeman who didn't want any more children, gave her $16 to go to Dr. Peacock, who performed an operation.

PREGNANT

Six months later Mrs. Strachan found she was pregnant again so she went to Dr. Peacock again. A letter from a Margaretta Duffy, 24, written to Constable Strachan and produced in the court, told him that after going to Dr. Peacock she didn't feel too bad, although it had been "terribly painful at the time".

She added she met a friend convalescing at Healesville who had also been to Dr. Peacock.

Peacock ignored the allegations and the Crown Law Department refused to take any notice of them so they remained unproven.

At his trial for the murder of Mary Davies, it was claimed Dr. Peacock had required a fortnight to dispose of the body to enable him to clear the house of all in-patients and all servants, with the exception of his trusted housekeeper.

The jury found Peacock guilty and he was sentenced to death.

Peacock appealed on the grounds that the Crown had failed to produce a body or any material evidence of murder.

The State Full Court upheld the conviction, but the High Court quashed it and ordered a new trial.

At the retrial which started on Tuesday, February 24, 1912 the jury disagreed. At his third trial, which started the following Monday, March 2, he was acquitted.

Dr. Peacock lived another 22 years before his death in 1933, aged 94. By then he had amassed real estate and other assets totalling $400,000 — about $16 million in today's terms.