Why Westgarth?

Did you ever wonder why the suburb and the school are named Westgarth?

They are named for William Westgarth.

He was born in Edinburgh in 1815. His English father was Surveyor-General of Customs for Scotland. He was educated at Dr Bruce's School in Newcastle, a commercial college for the future servants of Empire, but one which took the then radical step of teaching science.

Westgarth started work with a Scottish merchant with Australian interests, attracted by the opportunities he saw in the colonies, he decided to emigrate.

He arrived in Port Phillip in December 1840 and set about making money, "the grand bent of all", as he wrote to his mother. He commenced an importing business. After one false start, he was soon flourishing as a general importer with his business partners; Ross and Spowers.

But Westgarth also grew up with the Scottish Enlightenment (think Adam Smith and David Hume, economics and humanism) he believed he had a responsibility to improve himself and his society. He founded a Benevolent Society and became prominent in the Mechanic's Institute (mechanics meaning workers, an early education movement for working men started in Scotland). He enquired and wrote about conditions in the Australian colonies for the British market and published statistical reports on the economy of Port Phillip. He claimed it was an "agreeable and improving exercise for (his) leisure time", but he was one of the first to apply the science of statistics to the conduct of business and later to society and government.

Impressed by the German immigrants of South Australia, Westgarth returned to London to lobby the Colonial and Emigration Commissioners to subsidise the emigration of German agricultural labourers to Port Phillip. He purchased land near the current Thomastown/Lalor and Doncaster for the settlers. An area near Thomastown was known for a time as "Westgarthtown" and the name remains as an historic precinct within the City of Whittlesea (Mel Map 8 H5), including Victoria's oldest Lutheran Church.

As one of the most respected men in the Colony, Westgarth was elected un-opposed to the NSW Legislative Council in 1850 representing Port Phillip. He argued to end transportation (of convicts) and for separation (of Victoria). After separation in 1851 he was elected to the First Victorian Parliament as member for Melbourne. He pushed the then radical idea that all men should have a vote (not just land owners) in a secret ballot. He started the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce and served as its first president. In 1853 he helped establish the City's first Gas Company and the Bank of Victoria.

For a time Westgarth owned a farm on the banks of the Merri Creek, in what is now Coburg. It was then the Village of Pentridge (before the prison). He would delight in showing his visitors the platypuses in the waterhole near his house.

Westgarth was a vigorous and friendly man who loved travelling in Victoria, the farming lands and later the gold fields. He was a prolific writer. His books are vivid pictures of early life in Melbourne, well worth reading (free on the Internet). His writings on indigenous peoples, whose camps he sometimes stayed in, are for their time, insightful and sympathetic. His writings covered history, philosophy and politics. They were often written or edited on his frequent sea journeys back to England. In 1853 he returned to Britain, perhaps to find himself a wife.

Westgarth returned to Melbourne with new wife Ellison Macfie. It was immediately after the events at the Eureka Stockade. He was the natural choice as Chairman of the Commission of inquiry into the gold-fields. He was possibly the only person both sides trusted. The Commission ignored Lt Governor Hotham's instructions not to enquire into the immediate causes of Eureka, and recommended a general amnesty for the rebels. The Governor ignored them. The resulting trial, for treason, was a farce. There were no convictions. But most of the recommendations of the Inquiry were implemented; courts were established in the gold fields, the miner's fee was replaced by an export duty on gold, and a miner's right which carried legal rights including the vote. Peace returned to the gold fields.

Westgarth was serious, sensible and even "ploddingly consistent". He was considered a dull public speaker, but not without humour. When a political opponent (of Irish descent) claimed Westgarth told his German immigrants that they were to "set an example of sobriety for the Irish", he replied that "if I had ever said anything of the sort, it must have been of my own countrymen, as an Irishman can never stand to a Highlander at whisky".

Returning to Britain he established a Chamber of Commerce in London and was the Victorian Representation at an International Statistical Congress. He gave frequent papers to the British Association and Social Science congresses. He became concerned with the problem of poverty, in particular the failure of classical economics to provide adequate wages in many professions. He donated 1200 pounds as a prize for essays addressing solutions to housing the poor.

In 1888 he was invited back to Melbourne for the Centennial International Exhibition at the Exhibition Buildings. On the voyage out he wrote "Personal Recollections of Melbourne and Victoria", a lively re-creation of Melbourne from its earliest days to the gold rush and beyond. He was honoured in the Exhibition's opening procession as one of Victoria's pioneers.

He died in London in 1889.

When William Westgarth arrived in Port Phillip, Melbourne was barely 4 years old, you couldn't navigate Collins St after dark, it was still part of New South Wales and only landowners had the right to vote. At his death; Victoria was an independent colony, parts of Melbourne had gas lights, and every man was entitled to the vote by secret ballot.

When the secret ballot was introduced in Britain and the United States (decades after Victoria) it was called the "Australian Ballot".

Modern historians have described Westgarth as "the most perceptive of early Australian historians', 'the outstanding sociological thinker of the colonies' and even 'the John Stuart Mill of Victoria''.

William Westgarth was truly safe, fair and friendly.

Complied by Michael Horacek From Australian Dictionary of Biography and the writings of William Westgarth.