

Thomas Stoddart 1828-1905



*At left: Thomas Stoddart
At right: Rotunda in the Ballarat Old Cemetery*



The man who is laid to rest in this grave died on the 20 Feb 1905 (105 yrs ago). Shortly before he died he had taken a holiday trip to Queenscliff where he then went for a jaunt across the water to Sorrento. On the return journey Stoddart was so severely affected by a cool change in the weather that he soon became ill and did not recover. In his final days he was largely kept alive by stimulants. We are left to imagine what these might have been. That was what was reported in the newspaper but his death certificate, which we recently obtained, shows that he had suffered from cancer of the liver for three months and that was his cause of death.

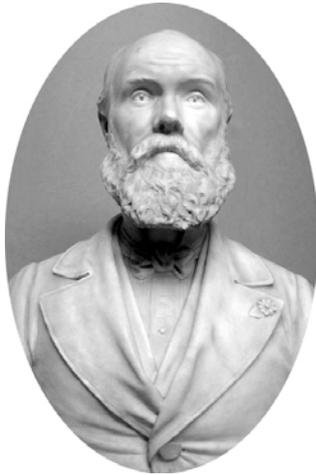


Stoddart grave before restoration

He died at 5 o'clock in the morning at the home of his business partner Mr T M Antcliffe at 321 Sturt Street (Myer block) and the news of his death spread quickly. That day flags were flown at half mast on the City Hall, the Mining Exchange and the Art Gallery as well as on clubs, businesses and private buildings. Unusually the Ballarat Stock Exchange was adjourned for the most part of the day and for his funeral as a mark of great respect for one who was held in such high esteem by his fellows.

It was Thomas Stoddart who had suggested the move from Sturt Street to where the Mining Exchange is today. It was fitting that he laid the foundation stone for that building and his large stockbroking business, Stoddart & Binnie, immediately occupied the upstairs rooms facing Lydiard Street North. It is well documented that he floated more gold mining companies than any other Ballarat man. He financed and directed many of them to great success. Generally speaking he was involved with the largest and most successful mines. This made him a wealthy man and it also made Ballarat a prosperous city.

At the Art Gallery they were remembering the man who was a member of their founding committee in 1884 and one who lobbied the colonial government for funds for the building of the Ballarat Fine Art Public Gallery which opened in 1890. Stoddart was also a founding member of the Ballarat Philharmonic Society formed in 1858. We also know that he supported sporting clubs (Central Bowling Club and Wendouree Lawn Tennis Club) and the Welsh Presbyterian Church.



Bust of Thomas Stoddart

The City Council already had a fine monument to Thomas Stoddart - a white marble bust on the upstairs landing which they had commissioned from the finest Ballarat sculptor of the time, F W Commons. (His name is on this grave, original cost £100.) This was in recognition of Stoddart's priceless gift twenty-one years earlier. In 1884 when he was in his mid-50s Thomas Stoddart had presented a dozen Italian white marble statues to adorn the public gardens. That wonderful collection is now 126 years old, still intact, and very much valued. They have been indoors out of harm's way for the past 8 yrs.

The story is told that Thomas Stoddart was visiting a sculptors' studio in Italy where he saw classical statues being made for the gardens in Genoa. On impulse, as goldmen of the day did, he ordered a dozen on the spot. He arranged for them to be shipped to Victoria and pedestals of Sicilian marble on bases of Victorian granite were made - all at his expense.

The significance of that first major gift is that it inspired the movement to make Ballarat a 'City of Statues'. It was said at the time that Thomas Stoddart was a forerunner of the metropolitan 'Kalizoic Society'. This was founded in 1884 to make Melbourne more beautiful and to '*aesthetically enhance colonial society*'. Ballarat was indeed fortunate to get off to such an amazing start with a collection which cost about £2000 at the time and today is conservatively insured for approximately \$200,000.

Other successful men followed Stoddart's magnificent example of public-spirited generosity. The £3000 bequest of his good friend and fellow-Scot James Russell Thomson added another six works of art to the collection in the gardens as well as the Statuary House to house five of them (1888). This time the sculptors were Australian not Italian. Thomas Stoddart was one of three trustees appointed to administer Thomson's bequest and to choose the statues.

The first marble statue for the city in Sturt Street was that of Robbie Burns (1887). Thomas Stoddart was the president of the committee which raised £1000 from public subscriptions. Opposite Burns in the median strip in Sturt Street came the statue of Tom Moore (1889, the Irish poet), also by public subscription. The next statue, a bronze of Eureka spokesman Peter Lalor (1893), was the gift of Mr Oddie. In 1899 three more white Carrara marble statues were placed among the flowers in the main city blocks - Hebe, the gift of businessman John Permewan and two smaller ones of Ruth and Flora paid for by thirty Sturt Street shopkeepers. In 1900 the white marble Queen Victoria statue was raised by public subscription. Many other statues, fountains and monuments were to follow after the death of Thomas Stoddart. Three generous gifts were particularly significant for the gardens.

* The largest bequest of its time was for the Ballarat Zoological Gardens, made 99 years ago by another gold-rich bachelor Henry Ben Jahn (£11,000 in 1911). The zoo opened in 1917 and lasted for fifty years.

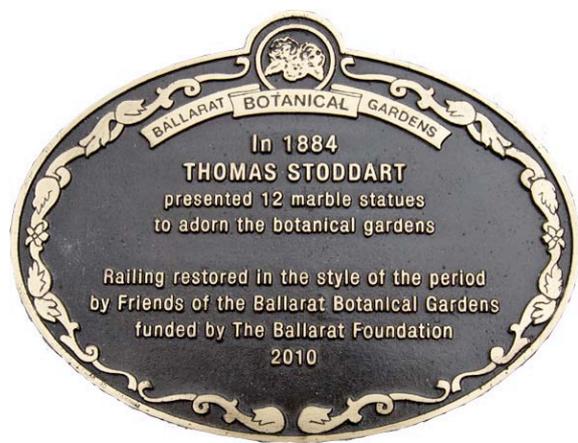
* The Prime Ministers Avenue of busts was a gift of yet another wealthy bachelor, Colonel Richard Armstrong Crouch (1940). It is now continued by the City of Ballarat.

* The largest and the most recent gift was from Robert Bruce Clark (89 yr-old Sydney businessman and grandson of Robert Clark, co-founder of the Courier) who gave \$2.2m for the Robert Clark Conservatory and Horticultural Centre in 1992, opened in 1994.



Thomas Stoddart was born in 1828 in the Borders of Scotland. His birthplace was the town of Roxburgh in the Tweed valley near to Melrose which was the home of Sir Walter Scott (another literary giant, statue at Civic Hall 1962). Stoddart attended school in Hawick (pronounced *Hoik*, about 20 miles to the SW, still in the County of Roxburgh) until he was apprenticed at 16 to a local joiner. Upon completion of his

four-year apprenticeship he was appointed to a position at the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich in London making a variety of items required by the military from medicine boxes to carriages. In his mid-20s he set sail in the ship *Queen of Arrandale* which landed at Port Melbourne. There is no record of his arrival or indeed of this ship at the PROV or in the Log of Logs but I expect that with his contacts on the Thames at Woolwich he would have worked his passage as a carpenter.



New plaque on Thomas Stoddart's grave

In the newly established colony of Victoria there was great demand for builders and for a year or so he worked at his trade in Melbourne earning the substantial wage of 30s per day. With gold fever rampant Stoddart did seek gold as a miner on the diggings at Ballarat and at Happy Valley for two years. In 1861, aged 33, he abandoned the tools of the miner, the pick and the cradle, and having amassed considerable means he speculated in mining shares and became a leviathan of the share broking business.

At the presentation of his statues on Queen Victoria's 65th birthday (24 May 1884), it was announced that after his recent Grand Tour of Europe Thomas Stoddart had decided to make Ballarat his future home and he was thus endeavouring to beautify a portion of it. He was so struck by the beauty of the Continental gardens that he thought, why not Ballarat?

It was suggested to the crowd of about 1000 spectators in a jocular fashion that he should take a wife and settle for the remainder of his days. There was laughter from the audience and they all hoped he would take this step. But he did not marry and there are no descendants so the Friends of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens feel quite privileged that we have been permitted to assume the responsibility for the refurbishment of the grave of Thomas Stoddart and at the same time affix a plaque in recognition of his wonderful gift to the citizens of Ballarat.



In his will dated 12 Sep 1901, three and a half years before his death, Stoddart named two sisters and five brothers, all deceased. Legacies were made to the widows of his brothers and their children. The probate papers name 6 nieces and 11 nephews in four of the families. The other three family groups do not have such detail.

This grave is a public monument to the memory of one of the finest men in Ballarat's history and it should be kept in good repair. It was on a cemetery tour in 2007 to mark the 150th anniversary of the

gardens that we noticed that the railing on this grave was missing while the rest of the grave was quite sound. In time the mystery was solved with the help of a few experts. The original 'barley sugar' railing was most likely brass and therefore worth stealing. Iron railing from the period has been re-used after being sand blasted and powder coated. The granite has been cleaned and the lettering re-gilded.

A hand-crafted oval plaque has been attached to the grave in recognition to Stoddart's legacy to the city. Expenses were covered in full by a grant from The Ballarat Foundation to whom we are most grateful.

The Friends submission last August was strongly supported by the organisations that were represented at the unveiling ceremony: Ballarat General Cemeteries, the City of Ballarat, the Ballarat Historical Society, the Art Gallery of Ballarat and the Ballarat & District Genealogical Society/PROV.

The grave restoration was timely as eight of the statues were put back out into the Ballarat Botanical Gardens in the previous week on Tuesday 2nd March 2010.

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