

Just Another Little Street in Freo: Arundel Street from 1844 to 2020

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Over a century and a half, Arundel Street has been a fairly typical Fremantle street, as its role and inhabitants changed in reflection of the changing society of the port city.

Origins

Arundel is one of several streets linking South and Marine Terraces between the city and its original southern boundary, South Street. They are named after English politicians or places, and Arundel in Sussex had strong connections with the Howard family (Dukes of Norfolk), after whom the next street to the south is named.²

1844 Town Plan of Fremantle, Showing Arundel Street



Source: State Records Office of WA, '[Plan of the Town of Fremantle, Western Australia. As marked out on the ground in 1844 by Chauncy](#)'.

The street was probably first conceived around the 1840s as part of the south-eastward expansion of the city. While town plans from the 1830s show only Suffolk Street and the blocks on the north side of Arundel Street, by 1844 Arundel and the streets to the south as far as South Street are clearly marked.³ Progress over the next two decades was slow and the 1865 plan was similar to that of 1844,⁴ but, over the following years, the local council made a series of decisions to improve the street. In 1870 the Ratepayers Meeting proposed that a start be made towards constructing the roadway, and the Town Council voted funds in 1871 and 1874.⁵ In 1883, the Council decided that the street should be macadamized and in 1889, on the suggestion of John Bateman, it allocated money to install curbing.⁶

Residential Construction

Residential construction began at the latest soon after October 1864, when the Acting Collector of Revenue offered a large number of Lots for auction, at least five of which were situated on Arundel Street. For example, Joseph Doonan (Assistant Superintendent of the Prison) purchased Lots 613 (now nos 25 and 27) and 614 (nos 21 and 23⁷) for £6 each. In 1872 the two lots were readvertised for sale at £300, including ‘a well-built six-roomed house, with verandah back and front; garden, out-house, fowl-house, pig-stye, coach-house, two wells, and every other convenience’.⁸

Most of the original residences—mainly stone or stone-and-brick cottages or houses—were built between the late 1870s and the early 1900s. Some, such as no. 32, the best house on the street, were built by the owners (in that case Captain John Maxwell Ferguson) for their own occupation.⁹ Others were constructed by property developers: the well-known developer Mr John Bateman had two six-room houses built on the street.¹⁰ By 1908 most blocks were already developed (though not necessarily with the same building still standing in 2020).¹¹

The housing stock was, however, of mixed quality. A 1903 the *Evening Courier* bemoaned:

Arundel-street is conspicuous by the number of its hovels and their dirty backyards. In this street here and there are houses of some dimensions, with proper sanitary equipment, but, generally speaking, the dwellings are such as a man who seriously considers his constitution would not wish to live in. In Arundel-st the alleged drains are blocked and in a very unsatisfactory state at the present time.

In 1911 a property on Lot 613 owned then by John Naylor was condemned as unfit for human habitation.¹²

Of the few lots that remained undeveloped (or that had been cleared) in 1908, Lot 613 was acquired in the 1920s by Italian migrant Cono Sgro, who built no. 25 as his residence and no. 27 as his business premises.¹³ The lot at the north-east corner of the street was long used for commercial purposes, until the construction around 1970 of the block of flats that is now no. 34. Although some say these flats were originally intended for nurses at the hospital, from a very early date they had a more varied occupancy.¹⁴ The two blocks on the corner of Marine Terrace are occupied by commercial buildings constructed since 1980. In the second half of the twentieth century, some of the original houses were demolished and replaced by newer buildings, sometimes after the builder said it would be more expensive to renovate than to

demolish the original home and then build a new one. But most of the original houses still remain, although in many cases their appearance has been changed through rendering and a series of alterations.

The Street's Residents

Socially, the street has housed a range of inhabitants from workers to well-off small businessmen and their families. Early residents included some quite notable citizens. The owner of no. 32, Captain Ferguson, had extensive interests in timber mills, shipping and brewing, as well as being Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for North Fremantle in 1903–1904.¹⁵ His wife was the long-time President of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, who succeeded in blocking the construction of a hotel at the corner of Arundel Street and Marine Terrace.¹⁶ William Thomas John, who owned nos 21 and 23 from around 1880 to the early 1900s, living in no. 21 and renting out no. 23 most of the time, was a prominent local storekeeper, Justice of the Peace and town councillor.¹⁷ The Holmes family, well-known butchers, also lived on the street in the early 1900s.¹⁸ Later, resident businesspeople included Cono Sgro in no. 25 and Salvatore Cicerello in nos 1 and 5.¹⁹ The street also housed prominent members of the labor movement, such as Mr Francis Rowe, a former MLA, who died there in 1939.²⁰

Most of the inhabitants were, however, working people. White-collar workers were represented and in 1903 16 people self-reported as clerks as against ten as labourers.²¹ But there were probably more manual workers, with many lumpers who worked at the Fremantle docks living in the street in the early twentieth century. One such was Thomas McSharer, foundation President of the Coastal Dock, Rivers and Harbour Workers' Union, who promoted the interests of lumpers in the press and the courts.²² In the late nineteenth century, the railway workshops provided a major source of employment for Fremantle and, even after the workshops were moved to Midland, several residents continued to work there, catching the 6.05 train (the 'Rattler') each morning.²³ For example, blacksmith Arthur Beaver, also known as 'Jack the Wolf', lived in no. 23 from around 1908 until his death in 1944, after which his widow and some of the family lived there until the late 1950s; at one time his son and grandson also worked at the Workshops. Arthur used to lead the family to Church carrying his prayer book, though he was also one to go for a drink at the workers club.²⁴

Given its location, it is not surprising that people engaged in the fishing industry made up a substantial part of the street's population, particularly in the middle of the twentieth century

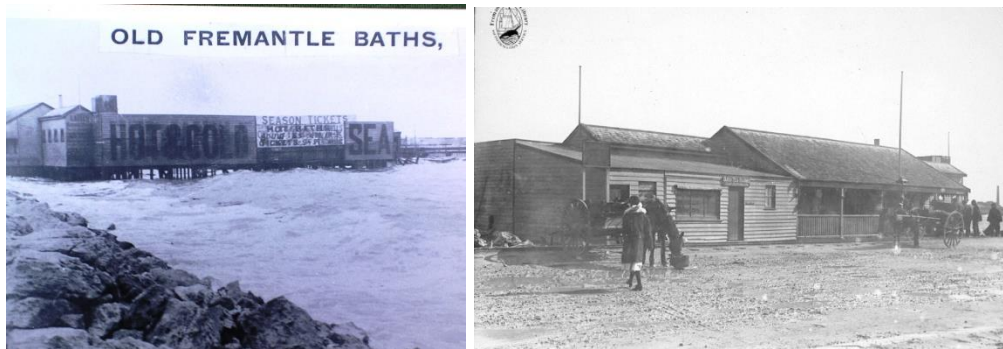
and a bit beyond. By the late 1930s, Arundel Street was known as the centre of ‘Little Italy’ and, with its neighbours, as a focus for Sicilian and Italian fishermen.²⁵ For example, Giacomo Iannello from Capo D’Orlando brought his newly arrived wife and child to no. 8 in 1931.²⁶ In 1963, of the 32 residents who registered an occupation other than ‘home duties’, eleven reported themselves as fishermen, four as labourers and two each as carpenters, storemen, painters and tailors.²⁷ The Council had to recognize the need to use Italian in communications: ‘It was decided to erect a notice in Italian at the foot of Arundel street, to stop the depositing of offensive matter over the sea wall. A notice in English is already erected there.’²⁸ While in early days the fishermen were seen as a poor section of society, by the 1970s many were quite prosperous, with for example the Cicerellos managing a substantial business and Florence and Angelo Merlino at no. 21 able to buy no. 23 as a rental property.²⁹

Down to the Ocean

One key feature of Arundel Street, particularly in its earliest days, was that it fronted on to the ocean, just over Marine (then Fitzgerald) Terrace. At the end of the nineteenth century sand drifts were a serious problem for the Municipal Council,³⁰ though at least the street avoided the fate that befell the five streets to the south, parts of which were washed away in a 1875 storm.³¹

From 1865 the bottom of the street housed a jetty for loading ships with water.³² The water was piped from the government well in a reserve between Arundel and Howard Streets. From the start, a local correspondent argued that ships did not use the jetty because the water was too expensive, and asked plaintively, ‘What is to be done with our new water jetty, is it to remain a fishing and bathing platform?’³³ From the early 1870s the jetty was superseded when water began to be piped to the new Long Jetty at Bathers Beach. Meanwhile, the reserve was subdivided into individual plots from 1882.³⁴

The Old Sea Baths at the Bottom of Arundel Street



Source: Fremantle City Library History Centre [Photo Ref Nos: 1786 and 1787].

Increasingly the beach was used for recreational purposes, though both decency and sharks worried concerned citizens:

For years past residents of the city and port have agitated for the erection of sea baths, where one could enjoy the delights of a refreshing plunge without infringing the rules of decency, or being subjected to the alarm produced by the knowledge that perhaps within a few feet of where you are bathing the carnivorous shark is disporting himself and waiting a favourable opportunity of pouncing upon the unwary.³⁵

So, in 1896, with the encouragement of the Council, the Fremantle Sea Bathing Company constructed the public Sea Baths at the bottom of the street.³⁶ The baths were opened on 15 April 1896 in the presence of Sir John and Lady Forrest. The *West Australian* enthused:

The dimensions of the swimming area are 200ft by 100ft, and the maximum depth of water under the spring-boards is 9ft. There are altogether 38 dressing rooms and 16 bath rooms, eight of the latter being for ordinary showers only and a similar number providing hot, salt, or fresh showers, according to the taste of the bather. ... The sea fence is composed of closely fixed pickets 6in. by 2¼in., which are driven well into the bottom and securely battened to the piling, which has a 12ft hold. This should render the most timid bather free from the fear of sharks.³⁷

These baths, which also had a refreshment room, remained the main venue for public bathing and for swimming competitions for around a decade, before a new set of baths were constructed in 1906 to the north, in what is now Fishing Boat Harbour. The old baths were seriously damaged by storms in 1908, irreparably so in 1910.³⁸

Its proximity to the ocean also made the street into an early centre for shipbuilding, most of which took place on the beach between Norfolk and Howard Streets.³⁹ The two houses closest to the Marine Terrace end of the street were both built by shipbuilders and used by them in their businesses. On the north side, James Storey used part of no. 2 as a workshop for many years up to 1896, after which he or members of his family lived there until 1936.⁴⁰ On the south side, James Clarke Howson, a carpenter in no. 1, almost certainly worked for his father's shipbuilding business on a plot of land, bounded by Arundel Street, Howard Street and the Esplanade, that had been part of the old government water reserve.⁴¹

Commerce

Although the street was predominantly residential, there was a substantial amount of mostly small-scale commercial and entrepreneurial activity. The early shipbuilders have already been mentioned. In addition, up to 1909 J. M. Ferguson Ltd operated the block at the north-east end of the street as a timber yard. One resident complained to the newspaper:

J. M. Ferguson, the newly-elected member of the Legislative Assembly, has a timber yard at the corner of the streets mentioned [Arundel Street and South Terrace], and during the greater portion of the day his carts occupy the footpath loading and unloading. Foot passengers and residents of the street are thereby compelled to take to the road if they don't want to collide with Ferguson's timber.⁴²

The block was later leased out for postal purposes and continued in non-residential use until 1970.⁴³ But the most common form of business in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was running boarding houses, or at least taking boarders in an otherwise residential house. For instance, in 1886 B. Wilson advertised for 'a few respectable boarders', and ten years later Mrs Elizabeth Rogers advertised for boarders in her rented property of no. 23.⁴⁴ When boarding house owners moved on, they would have their furniture sold by auction from their residences.⁴⁵ For most of the twentieth century, no. 32, the largest house on the street, served as a boarding house, with 22 adults living there in 1909 and 13 in 1919, when it was run by Helen Holmes as the Waratah Guest House.⁴⁶ It continued in that role for most of the twentieth century but, like no. 30, is now an up-market B&B.

Over a long period the most substantial commercial enterprise in the street was Cono Sgro's Oceania Trading Exchange at no. 27 (the current premises of The Freo Doctor). Sgro constructed the warehouse in 1928, moving his main business there from Mouat Street in

1937.⁴⁷ The company was originally established to supply Italian foods and wine to the Italian community,⁴⁸ but became a general providore and bottle shop. Supplying ships was a core part of the business, so they dealt in bulk goods, and two of their wine vats still survive today in the Freo Doctor. The family was active in the street up to the sale of the warehouse in 1994 and still owns a house there in 2020.

The Oceania Trading Exchange, 27 Arundel Street



Source: Fremantle Society Photographic Survey, https://archives.org.au/File:FSPPS_Arundel_Street,_Oceania_Trading_Store,_14-1-D.png; *La Rondine*, 1 March 1972, p. 6.

In addition there was a wide range of small enterprises, often run by women from their residences. Dressmaking was a common occupation: in 1900 Miss Bowden operated as a dressmaker in no. 29, and later Vera Beaver ran a tailoring and dressmaking business from her father's house at no. 23.⁴⁹ The street also housed small-scale retail establishments: a sweet shop operated from what is now no. 15, and Nunziata Miragliotta roasted coffee beans and sold them from her house at no. 24.⁵⁰ On a somewhat larger scale the buildings on the corner of Arundel Street and South Terrace (now Fremantle Central B&B) had many commercial incarnations, including as one of Fremantle's early bakeries.⁵¹

Recent Developments

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the street began to change its nature as many of the previous Italian residents moved to larger houses in the nearby suburbs and employment on the docks began to decline sharply. The America's Cup in 1986 gave a fillip

to Fremantle and Arundel Street, and accelerated a process of ‘gentrification’ in which several houses, such as no. 24, have since been returned to something close to their original appearance. The other big change has been ‘infill’, where most blocks have been either subdivided or filled with large extensions to the original house. Only a very few backyards now remain (for example, nos 21, 23 and 24). To some extent, though, this probably reverted to the situation a century earlier when many blocks had numerous outbuildings on them.

No. 24 Arundel Street, c. 1980 and 2020



Source: Fremantle Society Photographic Survey,

https://archives.org.au/File:FSPS_Arundel_Street,_No_24,_14-3-C,_1978.png

Perhaps the key characteristic of Arundel Street since its origin has been its continuing diversity. Within that diversity its core role has developed from primarily housing workers, many of them on the wharves, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, through becoming an Italian enclave in the mid twentieth century, to experiencing gentrification often at the hands of professionals in the twenty-first century.

¹ Tim Wright lives at 23 Arundel Street, and apologises if too many of the examples cited refer to that house. Many thanks to Wendy Antonovsky of no. 21 for sharing with me the rich materials and many stories she has collected in forty years of residence in the street; to Garry Gillard for his invaluable ‘Fremantle Stuff’ website (<https://fremantlestuff.info/>) and for alerting me to other sources; to Stewart Alger and the Fremantle History Centre for providing key materials; and to Beverley Hooper for her comments and suggestions.

² Kate Caldwell, ‘[Fremantle Street Names](#)’, *Early Days: Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society*, 1.9 (1931): 45–57 (accessed through Garry Gillard, ‘Fremantle Stuff’); but I suspect that the reference is not to Edward Howard as Caldwell suggests.

³ *The Express*, 6 April 1870; press reports are cited through Trove; State Records Office of WA, ‘[Plan of the Town of Fremantle](#)’.

⁴ ‘[Map of the Town of Fremantle](#)’, March 1865.

⁵ *The Express*, 6 April 1870; *The Herald*, 17 June 1871, 7 December 1874.

⁶ *The Herald*, 20 January 1883; *Western Mail*, 26 January 1889.

⁷ All house numbers on Arundel Street except nos 23 and 24 were changed in 1935/36 so that numbering started at the Marine Terrace, rather than the South Terrace, end of the street. House numbers used in this piece are those current in 2020.

- ⁸ *Western Australian Government Gazette*, 11 October 1864, p. 3; *The Herald*, 6 July 1872.
- ⁹ Heritage Council of WA, places database, [32 Arundel Street](#).
- ¹⁰ Heritage Council of WA, places database: [31 Arundel Street](#); *The West Australian*, 15 October 1888. For the Bateman family, see Garry Gillard, '[Bateman Family](#)' in 'Fremantle Stuff'.
- ¹¹ Perth Metropolitan Sewerage Scheme Plan 2080 - Fremantle District, State Records Office of Western Australia, series 634, items 2056 and 2080.
- ¹² *The Evening Courier*, 6 Feb 1903; *The Daily News*, 7 Jun 1911.
- ¹³ Heritage Council of WA, places database: [25](#) and [27 Arundel Street](#).
- ¹⁴ *The Western Australian Directory [Wise's]: 1900*, p. 78; Heritage Council of WA, places database: [34 Arundel Street](#); *Roll of Electors for the Subdivision of South Fremantle, 1972*.
- ¹⁵ Heritage Council of WA, places database: [32 Arundel Street](#).
- ¹⁶ *The West Australian*, 17 September 1896, 27 December 1899.
- ¹⁷ Rate Books (Fremantle History Centre file, 23 Arundel Street); *The Western Mail*, 18 April 1908.
- ¹⁸ *The Western Australian Directory [Wise's]: 1900*, p. 78.
- ¹⁹ *The Western Australian Directory [Wise's]: 1949*, p. 148.
- ²⁰ *Western Mail*, 24 October 1939.
- ²¹ *Roll of Electors for the Subdivision of South Fremantle, 1903*.
- ²² *Roll of Electors for the Subdivision of South Fremantle, 1903*, p. 13, 1905, p. 15; *The Daily News*, 12 October 1946.
- ²³ David Hutchison, '[The railway workshops in Fremantle](#)', *Fremantle Studies*, 3 (2004): 75-87 (accessed through Garry Gillard, 'Fremantle Stuff'); Les Smith, '[Rattling Along](#)', *Cinders and Soot*, 327 (Feb 2014): 9-11; Ivan Santich as told to Wendy Antonovsky.
- ²⁴ Martin Beaver, personal communication; Rate Books (Fremantle History Centre file, 23 Arundel Street); *The Swan Express*, 24 July 1925.
- ²⁵ Karen Lang and Jan Newman, *Wharf Rats and Other Stories: 100 Years of Growing up in Fremantle* (Fremantle: Fremantle Primary School P&C Association, 2004), p. 135; Sally May, '[The Italian fishermen of Fremantle: from blue-collar businessmen to lords of the sea](#)', *Fremantle Studies*, 1 (1999): 47-65; Sally May, '[People, places and spaces: reflections on the immigrant composition of Fremantle's fishing industry](#)', *Fremantle Studies*, 5 (2007): 30-39 (both accessed through Garry Gillard, 'Fremantle Stuff').
- ²⁶ West Australian Museum, 'Stories from the Sea', [Giacomo Iannello](#).
- ²⁷ *Roll of Electors for the Subdivision of South Fremantle, 1963*.
- ²⁸ *Fremantle Advocate*, 22 February 1940.
- ²⁹ May, '[People, places and spaces](#)'; Garry Gillard, '[Cicerellos](#)', in 'Fremantle Stuff'; Wendy Antonovsky, 'History of a House: Lot 614, Lot 2, 21 Arundel Street Fremantle'.
- ³⁰ *The Herald*, 25 December 1880; *The Daily News*, 3 May 1882.
- ³¹ *The Western Australian Times*, 22 October 1875.
- ³² 'Early Days of Fremantle', *The Fremantle Times*, 9 May 1919.
- ³³ *The Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 14 December 1866.
- ³⁴ Wendy Antonovsky, 'Changes to the Government Water Reserve' (unpublished diagram); *The Herald*, 14 October 1882.
- ³⁵ *The West Australian*, 11 January 1896.
- ³⁶ Ivan Santich, 'A History of Sea Bathing in Fremantle' (unpublished manuscript, courtesy of Wendy Antonovsky).
- ³⁷ *The West Australian*, 1 April 1896, 15 April 1896.
- ³⁸ *The Daily News*, 19 June 1906, 15 June 1908; *The West Australian*, 30 September 1910.
- ³⁹ 'Early Days of Fremantle', *The Fremantle Times*, 16 May 1919.
- ⁴⁰ Heritage Council of WA, places database: [2 Arundel Street](#).
- ⁴¹ J. K. Hitchcock, *The History of Fremantle: The Front Gate of Australia, 1829-1929* (Fremantle: Fremantle City Council, 1929), pp. 115-117 (accessed through Garry Gillard, 'Fremantle Stuff'); Heritage Council of WA, places database: [1 Arundel Street](#).
- ⁴² *The Sunday Times*, 4 Oct 1903.
- ⁴³ *The Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, 4 May 1912.
- ⁴⁴ *The Daily News*, 15 July 1886, 25 September 1895, 18 February 1896.
- ⁴⁵ *The Daily News*, 27 February 1890; *The West Australian*, 27 June 1903, 5 September 1903.
- ⁴⁶ *Roll of Electors for the Subdivision of South Fremantle, 1919 and 1929*; *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 15 December 1934; *The West Australian*, 10 December 1938.
- ⁴⁷ *The West Australian*, 29 July 1937.
- ⁴⁸ West Australian Museum Welcome Walls, [Cono Sgro](#).
- ⁴⁹ *The Western Australian Directory [Wise's]: 1900*, p. 78; Martin Beaver, personal communication.

⁵⁰ Florence Merlino and Violet Barac as told to Wendy Antonovsky; *The Western Australian Directory [Wise's]: 1928*, p. 124.

⁵¹ Wendy Antonovsky, personal communication; *The Inquirer and Commercial News*, 12 February 1897.